EATER OF KIDS

by

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DEDICATION

For Susan

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CHAPTER I

ONCE UPON A TIME, A CARNIVORE

Only after the kidnapping, after the police had asked their questions of all the nosey sheep and chickens and pigs and cows who happened to be near the schoolyard, after the television crews had recoiled their wires into their vans and driven away, after three entire weeks of slowly diminishing hubbub and phone calls and speculation from the sows and boars and piglets in his family and the neighbors who had seen him interviewed on t.v., only after all that did the pig Shorty Simpson remember the troll.

Only then did he recall that a troll exactly like the one recently described by witnesses had been following his group of third-graders throughout their fieldtrip at the Macon Municipal Zoo.

Now, as if he had just stepped off a bus, he remembered the troll's huge head, a troll's most famous feature, a grotesque red triangular head disproportionately large for the creature`s body. He remembered the mouth, a mouth with too many too-large teeth, a mouth that stretched almost completely around the head, as if the troll wore a logger's saw on its gums as a joke. And there, blinking down from

the triangular skull, the two tiny, yellow turtle eyes. He recalled the snarled, bat-like nose and the jutting lower jaw.

He had waited years to see a troll, and when one just strolled up and talked to him at the zoo, he managed to forget all about it in a few weeks. How could that be?

His attempt to relax in the steamy thickness of the Young Mammals' Christian Association mudbath was now ruined. He had been soaking there with the flat of his snout tilted toward the foggy ceiling and the bubbler turned on high, but began to think about the troll because of something he overheard in a lockerroom conversation between two other boar pigs, "Carl" and "Ed."

Simpson had passed the two pigs in the gym on his way to the mudtub. They carried racketball gear and towels and as they walked along and gestured with their rackets, they seemed to be trying to fill the echo chamber of the empty gymnasium with an exhibition of their senseless, booming voices. They entered the lockerroom just as Simpson was closing his eyes and beginning to enjoy the quietly bubbling mud.

Simpson had been working out himself on the stationary bicycle in the weight room, the bristles on his breast spreading over the neck of his Los Angeles Lakers tanktop, and he forced the stationary bike up a mountainous road in

his mind, excreting boar scent and trying to recreate an imagined moment in Mammalian Olympics for the sweet sow who was puffing from the other side of the room on the Nautilus butt-toner.

She had ignored him entirely, but in the mudtub he still could transport himself from the conversation of the two salespigs by revisualizing the contours of the sow's sweaty porquine frame. He was perfectly relaxed as the mud sloshed his nakedness, and was busy thinking about the way the sow`s University of Alabama sweatshirt flopped around her as she heaved at the machine with her trotters.

Then the pig named Ed dropped a bit of philosophy from his position behind the row of lockers, a metaphorical remark about the carnivorous nature of the business community in downtown Macon. Simpson's memory flashed like a slide show when he heard that single word "carnivorous," something about the way the pig had said it, and the word appeared before him in white on black, like the title of a movie, and immediately he found himself clicking through mental pictures from the past three weeks back to the kidnapping itself, then as far back as the end of the previous school term, until he arrived at the fieldtrip and the troll's gargoyle-like face with its tiny yellow turtle eyes. Simpson had forgotten all about the troll he had talked to at the zoo fieldtrip, had forgotten, in fact, to

mention it to the police after the kidnapping.

How could he not have thought of it? The police, the papers, the television had said over and over again, We are looking for a troll. He felt violated by some outside force for having forgotten the first troll he had ever met, as if someone had removed a wedge from his brain, and he had not missed it until it had been replaced. He felt like an idiot, if the truth be told.

Now he could not bring up having seen a troll, having talked to a troll before the kidnapping, of course, because he had been so fully in command of his senses, so confident at the time the police and the reporters set upon him with their inane questions and knowing nods, and he had explained so carefully and extensively to the police and the parents why he had acted the way he did, detailing the crime for them like a map. He was sure that now they would hold him accountable for something, no telling what, perhaps the crime itself. He knew and appreciated the domino-principle of natural law, and that if something might go horribly wrong it would, and the precariousness of criminal investigations, how they could topple in on innocent bystanders and witnesses until total confusion caused a gross miscarriage of justice. He had read about such things happening. They might suspect him if he were to spring forward with new information now. The irony and utter ridiculousness of the

possibility that the police and reporters might suspect him chilled him in spite of the warm mud. Not only had he nothing to do with the crime, he could not possibly care less. He could only even remember what the kid Peter looked like because he had seen his picture so many times in the newspaper. The little goat face had become a headliner. Soon it would be on milk cartons.

As he sat in the mud, his eyes now wide with attentiveness, he recreated the incident at the zoo in his mind, certain now that the troll who had followed his group at the zoo must have been plotting the kidnapping all along, must have been watching their school for months, waiting for just the right moment to nab one particular third-grader--why had he picked Peter, a plain, altogether unspectacular specimen, even for a goat.

Simpson's sole school memory of Peter was that he was the goat who had earned a zero in volleyball for not dressing out. The newspaper printed instead that he was "an ideal student." Simpson remembered chortling to himself as he tallied the marks in his grade book and determined that Peter had never once worn his gym shorts. He knew it was an awfully small technicality, but he got a kick out of giving an occassional zero, making the egg-shaped oh with his red felt-tipped pen, especially since he graded so generously in his American History classes, rarely handing out homework

and often giving tests a moron could pass. He was catching hell from the administration for what one of the academic types had labelled "a distinct flippancy." So to acheive a balance he gave zeros in his gym class to the sensitive types and the wimps. It all balanced out, like everything else, like birds eating bugs and bugs eating grass. If he caught it from the kid's parents, then he could always blame it on the system.

He attributed the oversight of forgetting about the troll to an understandable slippage of mind in light of the constant tongue thrasing he had received from the chicken Turp, the third-grade teacher who had been with him in the schoolyard when Peter was taken--a fact that everyone convienently seemed to forget. The cops, the newspaper people, the other third-graders' parents, they always wanted to talk to Simpson, to dog him with their questions. And Turp never let up.

Simpson often found himself paired with Turp on field-trips, and for the life of him, he could not imagine why. He had requested otherwise often enough, but the administration always seemed to lose his request, to drop it into some crack, or to stick it behind someone's saltlick.

He could still picture Turp as she must have been that day last term at the zoo, and what he couldn't remember, he easily could imagine, Turp with the frantic look she always

appeared to wear, and her glasses with their rock-candy lenses. On fieldtrips, she staged improvised roll calls every ten minutes, pairing off her students and making them join forefeet, hooves, and wings so none of them would wander away. Had she seen the troll that day? Probably not. She would have mentioned it by now because, of course, she would have remembered. She wore her efficiency like a chastity belt.

Simpson replayed the scene in his mind: Turp's group following his own group through the snake and lizard exhibits in the Reptile House, running in their untied sneakers toward the dripping swamp diorama, a popular Reptile House feature every year, one in which the crocodiles were the prime attraction, doing nothing more than lying on their bellies and occassionally shifting position, appearing primordial, and chewing on leathery-looking synthetic meat, the staple food of zoo animals. Simpson watched the memory as clearly as if he relived it; indeed, he might as well have been remembering it when it happened, he was so far removed in thought from the spirit of the outing at the time.

Simpson hated fieldtrips, hated all the bother of arranging transportation with the cud-chewing bus drivers, of nagging his third-graders into convincing reluctant and stupid parents to load them up on the proper day with a sack

lunch, of watching his class swirl around out of control at some supposedly educational but certainly fly-infested spot chosen by Turp, with Simpson feeling responsible for whatever damage they might leave in their wake. On his way back to the buses, he always tried to manage an apologetic smile in the direction of some male employee, some goat or donkey usually wearing a name tag and a jumpsuit. But in truth he had never worked out his embarassment of baby-sitting in public. He wanted to coach, to instill in third-graders an appetite for competition and to overcome their natural childlike satisfaction with finishing in last place all the time. However, competetitive sport was not one of the prime directives of his elementary school's administration.

Turp's group stayed in single file, but Simpson doubted the necessity of making his own group line up just because Turp's group was doing so. In fact, he could dimly recollect one of his college education teachers discouraging regimentation when dealing with young adults. Simpson could not reconcile any classification of adult which included third-graders, but he was willing to give his own group the benefit of the doubt, just for the sake of convenience. Rather than trying to instill an impossible sense of discipline in the little animals, he was content to stroll along and toy with the whistle he kept beneath his shirt. If

anything serious happened, he could always blow it.

When they entered the Reptile House, Simpson's group bolted straight away to look at the crocodiles. They had done the same at the gorilla exhibit in the Monkey House. But while the gorilla had made a point of staring back at them and pouting, and in one exciting moment, had even thrown a glob of feces at the glass, the crocodiles communicated no sign that they even realized the amusement their awesome strangeness provided for the third-graders. The crocodiles would not be hurling any feces in any case, did not even seem able to have any. They seemed unreal, unnatural, a living argument against any explanation for the position into which the more intelligent and forthright animals had supposedly evolved.

Simpson always fought a fantastic temptation at the edge of the crocodile pit, as he leaned on the dark metal rail that bore several boldly worded and altogether unnecessary warnings: Trespassers Will Be Eaten. He could never help imagining a viscious drama played out in which one of his tiny third-graders leaned too far in a moment of careless curiosity and toppled headlong into the sea of jaws. He fancied the thrill of the difference it might make in things, in his life, in the bother of fieldtrips, in the way the reporters might word their questions. If he could be held responsible now for allowing the kidnapping that

later pushed him from the inconspicuousness of his life, it was only for this, for his secret desire whenever he came to the crocodile pit to see the line of evolutionary demarcation breeched, to watch while someone besides himself stuck a trotter into hell itself. He knew, by god--he knew--something like that would be educational.

Simpson sized up the two salespigs as they moved naked toward the mudtub, their flabby middles, their doughy breasts, their fat jowls. They kicked off their rubber flip-flop sandles next to Simpson's. They continued their business conversation, just as if they were walking along the downtown mall in their polished shoes and power ties.

Simpson hated the softness that middle-aged animals brought to sports. He loved competing against them, of sticking their ideas of masculinity back up their snouts and beaks, of climbing up their backs and sending them home to grow sore and sour. He had played on the baseball team in his community college days, and could do fifty pushups right now if someone asked him.

He leaned back in the mudtub and found himself descending again into the caverns of his imagination, unable to fight off the temptation to wonder about the things in his life that suddenly had become mysterious. He wondered about the kid Peter, about where he might be if Simpson could somehow track him with an invisible beam of thought,

about what he and the troll might be doing. He snorted. What did he think they were doing? He felt eerie for imagining Peter when Peter was probably dead. He rubbed globs of warm mud on the back of his scalp, behind his ears.

He closed his eyes and the troll's face flashed across the inner darkness of his lids. The tiny yellow turtle eyes, the heavy bone of the lower jaw, the skin like knots of redwood. Simpson had been leaning on the railing of the crocodile pit at the zoo, watching Turp wave the children down from the rail's second bar, where some of them had climbed, though they were in little danger. Ducklings, piglets, calves, chicks, and kids pointed at the crocodiles, some of the children squealing, others quacking, grunting, bleating, or mooing, all looking for a better view of some bigger crocodile. Simpson had heard the troll--but now that he thought about it, maybe he had felt the troll--suddenly breathing at his side. He turned and there the troll stood, as if the tall figure had been there all along, as if the builders had put him there, like a post.

The troll had been following Simpson's group since shortly after they entered the park. Simpson recognized the white uniform, he had seen it occassionaly tagging along behind them. Looking back, he could recall the shirt and the pants as too tight on the creature's muscular body, the troll's arms and legs showing, as if the troll had trouble

finding clothes to fit him; Simpson could even recall, or thought he could anyway, an embroidered red name across the shirt pocket and the name of a dairy. The troll had smelled. Simpson could remember thinking that he must have just left work, or that he must have parked his delivery truck somewhere and ran into the zoo.

Simpson chuckled to himself. He actually had been trying to squint his mind to read the name on the troll's pocket. He would have to stop playing mental games with himself. He marveled at the complexity of his imagination, and wondered why god had put such a dangerous thing in a pig. All he wanted to do was coach, teach third-grade history, play a little basketball, and go to the lake on the weekends to waterski with his brother.

Turp made a big production of the fact that Simpson allowed his class to play on the rail in front of the crocodile pit. But he had been watching the children from the other end. Turp overreacted. Simpson always told her she worried too much. Adults never gave children credit for having any durability or common sense at all. Simpson's father used to say that children were made of rubber, that if you snapped them, they would always bounce right back.

"Pig, get over here and watch these children," the chicken yelled at him.

"I'm watching them," he yelled back. He touched the

whistle under his shirt. How many times had he wanted to blow it in her face?

"You're ignoring them and they're getting restless."

"Turp, I've never seen a bald chicken. But you're going to lose every one of those pretty feathers worrying like that."

He knew that she hated him, but he could always shut her up with a personal remark. One thing he learned from growing up as the youngest pig in a huge family--shoot from the hip. He did his job, and he didn't appreciate criticism from Turp or any other teacher, administrator or parent. They knew nothing about him, about the values he could teach, about the tough lessons he had learned. He had paid his way through his last two years of college by washing cars at his father's lot. Before that, he had pitched for the baseball team in junior college until he had developed tendonitis in his pitching foreleg. He had been a camp counselor, had taught boat safety. Children understood him and respected him. They listened to him and looked to him for guidance, and as his father had told him once: "Whether we're talking teaching or selling Buicks, Shorty, you got to respect the bottom line."

Turp could never find what she was looking for in Simpson. She always seemed on the verge of exploding from the neck up, of choking on her anger. Someday, Simpson

figured, one of her students would appear at his door and say, Coach Simpson, Miss Turp's head has come off and she is running laps around the ceiling of our room. She was the kind of teacher the students hated, the kind he would hate too if he still were in the third grade. She had won the loyalty of the brainy-types, of course, and they always convinced her to sponsor some club or other. But the tough guys and the dummies, the fighters and yellers and spitters, the ones who sat in the back of the class and faked farts, they had only Simpson among the entire faculty for a role model. Simpson felt that they also had a club, and that he had been initiated as its host by unspoken agreement.

Nevertheless, at the crocodile pit, as it would happen, on that one particular day at the zoo, through some godless quirk of fate, one of his third-graders--Peter, the goat kid who was kidnapped, in fact--actually did climb onto the top rail and even started to fall in. Simpson had been distracted by the presence of the troll. The troll had grumbled, blankly staring down on the crocodiles as they chewed obliviously on their fake fish, about how much he despised synthetic meat.

Simpson nodded, a bit stunned. He had thought that only zoo animals and pets had to endure synthetic meat. He bought cans of the repulsive wet variety for his own dog, Nuts. He thought to ask the gloomy troll why anyone would

eat food meant for dumb carnivores when there was perfectly good slop of all flavors on every grocery shelf. He knew nothing about trolls, and he hated to miss a chance at asking one about its habits. He had never even heard until after the kidnapping that trolls at one time--only a hundred years ago, according to the t.v.--had eaten meat, had actually been carnivorous. No wonder they nearly had died out. Laws had been enacted against such things, and nobody could live long eating dog food.

But Turp drew Simpson's attention back to the mob of school brats. She squawked at Peter, who was swaying on the rail and windmilling his forelegs, apparently trying to showoff his goatly balancing skills and finding the rail not up to his talents. Turp snatched him down by the back of his pants. Then she screamed her concern at the poor kid in her hysterical way, and Peter stared at her, obviously not sure of what he had done wrong. Simpson rolled his eyes to the troll and the troll smirked. Even the troll understood. Then Simpson strolled over to Turp and the goat, who was trying to wiggle from Turp's grip.

Turp immediately sunk her beak into the opportunity. She squawked up and down about what she said was bound to happen sooner or later, taking full advantage of the kid's misfortune, as if he had been eaten and was not standing there, listening to her every word.

All the other third-graders drew around them now, mooing, chirping, making a nuisance. A lamb tugged on Simpson's foreleg and Simpson swatted her away.

"Great, Turp. Might as well load up the buses now."

"If you had been doing your job, Coach Simpson." she said, emphasizing the word "coach," and snipping the sentence.

Simpson groaned and turned away. He looked for a sympathetic witness to the scene in the troll, but the tall, triangular-headed figure in the white shirt and white pants had disappeared. Turp had missed seeing him--of course she had. But the troll was there all that time, following them and waiting, and now it seemed to make weird sense, like a word problem in a fifth-grader's mathematics book. He had picked Simpson, had picked his group, and no one but Simpson knew it now. If Simpson had known any trolls, he might be able to hand the police some suspects. He might even be able to handle his own private investigation. But as it was, he would keep the knowledge under his hat. Besides, the way he figured it, nothing he could do mattered anyway. Three weeks without a ransom note? By now the kid was dead for sure in a big black pot, probably little more than a soup bone.

Simpson relaxed with his back against the side of the mudbath, the warm bubbles gurgling and making bloop sounds

and wet mud sneezes against his jowls. Now only the top of his snout, his eyes and his ears floated above the thick surface of mud. The other two pigs in the tub had struck a similar posture. They had relinquished their topic of conversation for the tranquilizing effect provided by the mud, the standard against which all other forms of relaxation were measured. Simpson eyed the two pigs and was secretly urinating beneath the surface -- infraction number one of ten on the "rules of the mudpool" sign -- when someone from above him dropped his name.

"You're Coach Simpson."

Simpson opened his eyes. The other heads floated in contentment still, as if they were not the heads of pigs after all, but crafted paper mache imitations. Simpson found himself looking up at a white goat dressed in a pair of oversized boxer shorts and a sleeveless undershirt. A cigarette clung to the goat's mouth. The goat and his underwear were throughly soaked, and he looked down at the pigs in the tub, from one to the other, as keen on them as they were oblivious to him. The goat's white hair dripped down in cowlicks all over his body. He bent his face over a metal cigarette lighter that he began to use to flick sparks at the cigarette. He was having difficulty because he was shivering in the dripping underwear. Goats always looked skinny to Simpson, and when wet, they looked boney and

grotesque, like bad jokes. When Simpson was growing up, pigs always made fun of goats at the pool. The goat was dripping on Simpson's towel.

Around the cigarette, the goat said, "Let me ast you somethin'," but he didn't ask because he finally managed to light the cigarette, and he pulled a long drag from it.

Simpson watched the glowing end of the goat's cigarette, and thought: this is some dope's father. He could always tell. They pestered him at restaurants and movies. He never had been bothered at the YMCA, however. He felt lulled by the hum of the mudtub's motor. A thick fog sat on him. He wondered what he should say. He only could think that the goat was a jerk for lighting a cigarette in a health spa. But the other two pigs sat like stumps. The goat blew smoke and tottered. He's drunk, Simpson realized. The goat's eyes were shot with red streaks.

Finally, Simpson said, "Who are you?"

"My wife's giving me the fits about her kid," said the goat, and continued: "Ain't your fault, and I ain't blaming you. I just come by to swim, and I see the kid's gym coach sitting over here in the mud."

Simpson sank lower, until he felt the warm mud at the line of his mouth. He closed his eyes and counted to ten. Simpson wondered if the fool would ever identify himself. The other pigs stared at the insides of their eyelids, their

necks tilted toward the ceiling. Simpson drifted forward, and could feel the warm ooze across his stomach and his privates. He floated, dragging the tip of his trotters across the bottom of the tub. He hoped the goat would get the picture, but when Simpson opened his eyes, the dripping figure still stood above him, sucking on the cigarette.

"What do you want?" said Simpson, floating between the other pigs, his back to the goat.

"I wondered if you figured the troll would eat my kid."

Simpson coughed. The other pigs had opened their eyes now. There was no way to escape. Under the mud? Simpson wondered how long he could hold his breath.

"How would I know?" he said. "Jesus, why does everybody think I have all the answers?"

"Come on, College. Help out an ignorant goat asshole, why don'cha?"

"Yeah, help him out," said the pig named Carl.

Simpson opened his mouth, but then thought better of continuing the conversation.

The goat blew smoke and said, "Well, hell, I'll spell it out for you. If he eats him, then there ain't no body. Ain't no body, there ain't no insurance. I got that right, I bet."

Simpson smiled. "You're worried about the insurance."

"Hell yes, College," said the grim-looking goat, "I

heard about something just like this crap in Texas. They won't believe your kid's dead just because you tell them so. What the hell's a poor fella supposed to do in this world? Goddam Republicans. A goat without a lawyer, hell, he ain't shit."

He sucked on the cigarette and nodded. The smoke moved up into his eyes, and he squinted.

"You're a realist," Simpson said.

The wet goat clomped unsteadily around the tub and hunkered on the edge, behind Simpson, and his gut rolled out. He looked like a pear. The goat leaned his sunken face. His breath smelled of sour tobacco and beer.

"I'm a goddam drunk, my college pig friend. The kid's mother thinks he's alive, but you and me don't, do we?"

He pointed the cigarette, now having forgotten it in his hoof.

"Her family all came over. They're over to my house now. Watching the t.v. with their feet up. My wife's mother, her sisters, the preacher, the whole lot of them. They tell her the kid's alive."

"But you don't?"

"He ain't my kid. I'm not his real father. I keep out of it. I just came here for a swim."

Simpson nodded and drifted in the mud away from the goat and away from the other two pigs, who watched and

listened to the conversation as if they had money bet on it.

The goat turned sideways, and Simpson watched his jagged, dripping profile out of the corner of his eye. The goat continued to motion with the forgotten cigarette as he spoke. Some ashes fell into the mud.

"I never even adopted him, so I don't have a say-so in his upbringing. And now that he's kidnapped, I'm the son of a bitch."

"How's that?" said Simpson, wondering if he would have to avoid this goat from now on. The goat's face turned and he fixed his red eyes on Simpson's. His wet beard dripped.

"That's just the way they think," he said, and he saw the cigarette. He raised it to his mouth and stepped with a bump as his back met the wall. His head wobbled and he slid to a sitting position on the wet tile floor with a thud. He dropped his cigarette lighter, and his cigarette fell out of his mouth and into a puddle that had formed from his dripping hair.

The pig named Ed said, "He's passed out."

The goat had closed his eyes, his head tilted to the side, his mouth open. Simpson rose out of the mud, and the cold air hit him. He bundled his wet towel under his foreleg and slipped his rubber thong sandals onto his feet.

"Who is he?" Carl said, "Is he a member?"

Simpson shrugged.

"Well, he thinks he knows you," said the pig.

"Yeah," said Simpson.

The goat had begun to snore.

"Well, I gotta wash the mud off," said Simpson.

He walked toward the showers, naked except for his rubber sandals. The kid's stepfather won the prize for piss-poor timing. Simpson could feel a host of bad memories crawling up from wherever they had been hiding. Before he made the showers, his pleasant mudbath trance was entirely gone. In its place, a cast of headaches and ass-aches in the shape of animals lined up in front of a ticket window to his brain. They filed inside, the house lights dimmed, and the curtain began to rise.

CHAPTER II

BACK FROM THE DEAD

Sweet drove the magically gassed-up milktruck for weeks, using the truck's hot backsection not only to store his belongings, but to salt-cure the porquine truckdriver's body for the trip to Florida. He waved to the police in their black-and-white cruisers, hexing them, and as a ticket into the tranquility of animal suburbia, to drive through the quiet of it and think, each night he stopped by the dairy, cast a befuddlement spell on the loading dock goat, picked up the dead driver's load of iced-down milk, and delivered it, although not to the right houses, of course--carefully stepping past tricycles in dark garages, humming, scratching guard dogs behind the ears.

He wore the dead driver's tight-fitting shirt--"Joe" in red script across the breast pocket, until he heard that the drivers rented their uniforms from Dixie Dandy Uniforms, a company with the thoughfulness to deliver. He cast a mind bucket over the young delivery-pig from Dixie Dandy on the pig's drop-off day at the dairy, then selected a half dozen new white shirts and trousers, all with animals' names on the pocket--Bob, John, Sam, Doug--and all at least three

sizes too small. Two of the pairs of trousers had a hole for a tail. Since Sweet knew no seamstressing spells, he paid an old troll hag whose armpits smelled to cast a few alterations on the pile of shirts and pants. Sweet paid her five dollars for each, then she got the sleeves too long and burnt a hole through one of the pants.

Sweet adjusted the squeaky seat and the side mirrors of the truck to fit him. He wrote notes on Joe's clipboard and cooled his hot neck and chest with the oscilating electric fan Joe had clipped to the dash. He listened to an eight-track tape of Steppenwolf songs on a tape player Joe had rigged beneath his seat with red and yellow wires, a speaker in the floorboard among styrofoam coffee cups and empty Budweiser cans. He drove through the lamp-lit streets of the suburbs, drumming his thick fingers on the large black steering wheel, nodding his head to the growling vocals of "Born To Be Wild" and "Magic Carpet Ride."

In the mornings after he had finished delivering Joe's milk--he always curdled each bottle with a wave of his hand before leaving it on a doorstep--he drove to the Dairy Queen restaurant across the street from the elementary school.

Every morning he would sit on the high truck seat and slurp a chocolate milkshake through a straw. He would watch the school's janitor-goat shuffle across the dew-covered lawn toward the flagpole, a folded flag under each foreleg.

The goat always had trouble clipping one of the flags without dropping the other, or getting either onto the pole right-side-up on the first try, and the buses would arrive, and the animal parents in their station wagons, and the animal teachers with their notebooks and boxes of rocks or butterflies or shells. And the piglets and ducklings and chicks and lambs and calves and kids in their bright colors and their sneakers would fill the air with laughter and cackles and moos and bleats, most of them shouting just to make noise, until the noise rose like ocean water, the waves fighting each other and bursting without distinction.

And the goat janitor finally would successfully hoist the flags with the schoolyard empty again around him and the buildings behind him big with life, and he would stare up at the two flags and watch them wave. He would smile and shuffle back across the yard, as if he had done the only important thing he would do all day.

Sweet never worried about such early morning witnesses. Joe's teeth protected him--in the bag he kept in his shirt pocket. He had plied them loose and soaked them in bleach with a the skin of a snake. He never worried that wherever he went, that whatever he did, he looked suspicious by nature to the animals he had lived quietly among all his life. He hung a dried dog's tongue his grandfather had long ago given him from his rearview mirror to keep him safe. He

never worried about the Dairy Queen employees who pulled the morning trash out on wheeled barrels to the dumpster and stared at him, at the gigantic, powerfully-jawed red face drinking milkshakes through a straw and watching the school from a yellow-and-white milktruck. He erased sections of the teenaged employees' brains as they passed, replacing the thoughts with FM radio waves. As the teenagers returned from the dumpster with their empty twenty-gallon garbage cans, they always ignored him, and their mouths moved, parroting phantom music sounds.

He had learned his spells from the meanest and largest of his two grandfathers, his father's father, who had taught Sweet and his brother Jerry all the spells of the Bistle family, but only a fraction of all the troll spells, and the two young trolls had wanted to learn them all. Now the world had changed, and magic was either obscene or simply out of fashion, both the classic manipulation spells of troll stags and the common housecleaning spells of troll hags.

Grandfather Bistle had been dead twelve years now, his big body buried in the woods near the small town of Centrifuge, Florida, where he had been born. The old fat troll hanged himself from a bridge abutment outside of Macon when Jerry and Sweet were still too young to be told why.

But after the two brothers had a couple of beers, Sweet

still could start Jerry thinking about their lives as fascinated young trolls under Grandfather Bistle's tutelage. Jerry would talk about raising his eight troll children in the old ways, but he always started complaining that he had bills to pay, he had boat payments to make, animal neighbors with their eyes on him already. Blackmarket meat was both dangerous and expensive.

Sweet couldn't blame Jerry for his abandonment of their childhood passion for magic either. Jerry already had gone through one ugly divorce for using magic on his wife, for making her think she was a banana squash--she squatted in the garden until Jerry had a change of heart and revived her--and he couldn't take the risk of attracting attention, or of arousing his new hag's suspicions.

Jerry's new hag, Millie, had stopped him from smoking and had started him going to a Methodist church. But sometimes a few beers would rekindle Jerry's deep-rooted taste for down-home meat, and he would talk about braining and gutting his boss at the carpet mill, a pig with no appreciation for the suddeness with which the old days could return and a social order based on the natural food chain could re-emerge.

Millie treated Sweet to the cold shoulder whenever he appeared at their house. Jerry told him that Millie would distrust anybody who lived in a car-trailer in the woods and

mixed synthetic meat into everything he ate. She called it "poor breeding." Jerry defended his family's honor by saying that it was just his little brother's bad taste. Once, when Jerry and Millie's septic tank backed up, Millie suspected Sweet of placing a curse on it because she had told him to stop encouraging Jerry to drink beer. Millie just didn't understand Sweet. He never would throw spells on another troll, least of all his own brother.

Still, neither she nor Jerry could understand Sweet's complete fascination with the past, with the way things had been done in Grandfather Bistle's day, and Sweet's addiction to the taste of what, for the purposes of the modern world and the modern imagination, was dog food.

Sweet had spent the past few years on the road, moving from job to job, working for animals half as big and twice as dumb as himself. When he returned to Macon, Jerry found him a temporary job painting an elementary school building inside and out. But the Summer began to draw to a close and the painting was only half done. The contracter, a bull, caught Sweet with his back to him in one of the classrooms, looking over the third-graders' artwork on the walls as if he were in a museum, and drinking from a quart bottle of Schlitz Malt Liquor. Sweet ignored the bull's loud and insulting tone, but when the contractor stuck his hoof up in Sweet's face, Sweet grabbed it and held the bull in an

foreleg lock while he poured a gallon of white paint over the fat mammal's head.

That night, Sweet had the strongest craving for meat he had ever felt. He ate three scoops of addictive meat-sludge, and in the sickness that followed, was certain that his Grandfather Bistle`s ghost visited him in the car-trailer, his upright and open coffin floating into Sweet's bedroom, as it had done for weeks following the old troll's death.

Trolls had always believed, according to Grandfather Bistle, that troll stags could return from the dead for one last meal if they had been mean enough and had eaten enough meat in life. But if a troll did come back, Sweet asked, and he couldn't find any meat, if no one could find him any meat, what would happen? Grandfather Bistle snarled and said that if he himself decided to come back, someone had damn well better give him some meat or he was going to be mad as hell.

Sweet's family never really ate meat, a highly illegal commodity in the sensitive world of animal-made law and order. They only even ate synthetic meat, in fact, when his father was home from prison, which was an infrequent occassion at best. His father had been in and out of prison for eating meat for most of Sweet's childhood years, and his mother hated meat because of his father's obsession with

it, because he could not swear off it even when he knew he would be caught, and because of the company he kept--whatever meat-eaters the cat dragged out of the swamp, she would say--when he finally found his way out on paroll.

No doubt their father had inherited his love of meat from Grandfather Bistle, and no doubt Grandfather Bistle truly would be mad as hell if no one served him meat should he come back from the dead. But Jerry, who was older and wiser to the ways of the world--and to old trolls and their bragging--than his brother, told Sweet that Grandfather Bistle was having him on, that he was just saying that about coming back from the dead to look for meat because he was angry at their mother for carting him to Macon from Florida, putting him on a vegetable-mush diet, and making him feel like a "sack of shit." Jerry said that he had overheard the hags talking, and that Grandfather Sweet had been living down in Centrifuge off of a diet of cats and dogs snatched barking and scratching from the yards of his elderly animal neighbors. When their mother had wrangled him into the car and brought him home, he was about to be tarred and feathered and run out of town on a rail anyway.

But Sweet knew Grandfather Bistle must be telling the truth.

After the old troll's funeral, Sweet could only find eddys of sleep in the night. For weeks after the trolls in

dark suits lowered Grandfather Bistle into the plot outside of Centrifuge, Sweet could not rid himself of a horrible vision, a waking, sobbing nightmare of sorts, in which his grandfather, himself awake, but in his coffin, and in his own black suit, lay inside the grave with his eyes wide and his broad stomach suffering memories of meat. And Sweet cried until his own sobs became the sobs of Grandfather Bistle, who lay in his coffin, suffering the long damnation of a monstrosity of hunger together with the hell of slow, slow service.

Sweet suspected Grandfather Bistle was already mad as hell, had been mad as hell from the day he was born, and had spent the rest of his life growing older, fatter, and madder. Sweet watched the window of his bedroon late at night, waiting for Grandfather Bistle somehow to make it to his street in Macon from Florida, to claw his way out of the grave in Centrifuge--to return by hitchhiking, stealing a car, or hopping a train--to slap his flat red hand on the glass, sporting a wide-eyed look of erupted impatience and a frightening disposition.

"He killed himself," Jerry said, shrugging. "Why would he want to come back?"

Sweet never understood how Jerry, after spending hours at a time in the root cellar with Grandfather Bistle, after learning spells that made milk sour, that made boats

overturn, and that gave dogs diharrea, could ever doubt the power of meat and the power of magic and the word of Grandfather Bistle.

Finally, after Sweet spent years of trying to convince Jerry to help him with the magic needed to bring the old troll back from the dead for his one last meal, Jerry himself betrayed him. When the pig-owned land development company in Centrifuge dug up their grandfather's grave in the name of progress, and signed Jerry and Millie a check for two thousand dollars, Sweet literally pulled his hair out in anger. After that, he could only pass out exhausted from lack of sleep; he could not find sleep on his own. His visions became vivid, full-color realities at night, they infected his mind with the old troll's floating coffin and angry bloated eyes by day. Sweet demanded that Jerry and Millie refuse the money, that they throw it back in the pig-owned company's face. But the damage already had been done--the body had been cremated and the ashes mailed to their father at the Georgia State Penitentiary in a black tupperware bowl. Millie argued that she wanted to send her children to college, and, she added, to avoid raising another ignorant troll to terrorize the earth with his carnivorous attitude.

Sweet had heard enough. Even though the old troll's body had been incinerated, the horrible visions continued.

He immediately began plans to serve his grandfather the last meal he desired, to somehow communicate to the old troll so that the ghost that now haunted him would leave him alone. He would kidnap an animal in broad daylight, he would use the magic his grandfather had taught him, and he would butcher the animal in the lobby of the office building the pigs had built on top of Grandfather Bistle's grave. He thought about the elementary school he had halfway painted. He remembered the pictures taped on the walls, and one in particular, by a kid named Peter, a remarkable picture in crayon of a troll devouring a family of goats. In Peter, he knew he had found a connection. If he could locate the kid Peter again, if his gasoline spells could fuel the car to Florida, he would have a fine meal for the fat troll's feast. Sweet would find the kid who was so fascinated with monsters, and he would introduce himself.

CHAPTER III

SLEIGHT OF HAND

Simpson closed his eyes and lifted his snout into the sun. He stretched his trotters and his forelegs, yawned and leaned backwards to take a nap on the school steps. Almost immediately he was interrupted by the approach of loud music. While he could phase out the sound of the third-graders as they wrecked the schoolyard, he could not ignore a stereo blaring out "Born To Be Wild" at full volume. The sound rolled along with a milktruck, a tired old yellow-and-white Chevy that moved like an armadillo past the playground fence. The Steppenwolf music pounded out from the truck's window and stomped across the hot schoolyard asphalt, the driver's large visage hanging out the window, as if looking for something in the schoolyard--a pitifully ugly troll face both grotesque and crustaceous-red.

The rock-and-roll troll drove the truck off the road, nudged the fence, and stopped. The troll's head disappeared into the truck, then reappeared a moment later as he opened the back of the truck and stepped out. He wore a white milktruck driver's uniform and swung his shoulders like an ape. His large head was spread sparsely with coconut hair.

He moved toward the fence, leaned across, and beckoned one of the students, a young goat sitting by himself in the shade. The goat stood obediently. Simpson raised the whistle he wore around his neck. He wet its metal mouthpiece, and wondered if the children would hear it above the noise of the stereo.

As if able to read his mind, the troll lifted his eyes into Simpson's direct line of sight. Simpson stopped.

The troll drew circles and weird patterns in the air with his huge red hands, and the children who had come out for recess, who filled the scene with oranges and pinks and yellows under the big sky--the piglets, chicks, kids, ducklings, lambs, and calves--stopped swinging, stopped seesawing, stopped running in circles around each other. They watched. Quacks, clucks, oinks, brays, bleats, and moos all stopped. A piglet in a sailor suit hung suspended from the monkey bars, a lamb in a pink dress stopped on the slide. Simpson blew on the whistle, and produced a pffft. He might as well have blown through a potato.

Turp appeared beside him on the steps. Her neck-feathers stood at alert. Simpson followed her gaze and a yardstick she was pointing toward the troll--who was now waving his hands over the gathering school children as if weaving a web. Simpson investigated his whistle, brand new, eight dollars at Sears. He looked deep inside it.

"Hey, somebody swiped the pea," he said.

Turp stepped down from the steps, cupped her wings on her beak, yelled into the loud wave of music. The small animals were looking into the sun, lost in the movements of the troll's thick red hands.

"Oh god, oh god," said Turp.

She moved forward across the schoolyard.

"What are you doing, Turp?" said Simpson, and followed a step or two for a better view of the troll. Something looked oddly familiar about the fellow. He tossed a trotter forward onto the asphalt, following Turp from a growing distance.

"There she goes," he grumbled, trying to pick up the pace. He always had to clean up with apologies after Turp flew off the handle.

"Get away, get away," yelled Turp, either at the troll or the students--only she could have said for sure.

Turp should lighten up, Simpson knew. She panicked in any situation that required a level head. He knew what she needed: a a good hosing down. Chickens were not cut out for teaching jobs, in any case. They should be kept at home, or should have jobs as typists, jobs without the danger of unpredictability. Give a chicken a mop and a long hallway.

Turp moved more quickly all of a sudden, her yellow

legs flipping beneath her, then she flung herself past the abandoned jungle-gyms and swing-sets, shoving needlessly at a swing. She looked every bit the charging soldier, carrying her yardstick as a rifle. Simpson watched the empty swing, the chains jerking. He stopped and waved a forefoot at her, as if letting go of a leash, and Turp's unintelligible squawks fell into the beating music, as if she ran into the sea, shouting at the surf. Then, remarkably, from the center of the group of yellows and pinks and oranges, a goat levitated up, and over, the fence.

The troll had never touched him, simply lifted him out of the schoolyard as if packing away a marionette, as if he had done it entirely with undetectable strings. What a neat trick, thought Simpson.

Turp pushed through the school children and rammed into the fence. The troll produced a burlap sack from thin air with a snap of his wrist, and had the kid stuffed inside it without a fuss. He tucked the bundle under his arm, then stopped for a moment and watched Turp as she ran back and forth behind the fence, leaping desperately--as if the chicken were wrenching her psyche for the long-forgotten ancestoral knowledge of flight. The troll truly seemed amused. Then the troll tossed his package into the back of the truck, shut the doors, climbed in himself, and drove away.

As the sound of the beating music relented, then fell with the truck over the top of the hill, Turp's wails of protest replaced it. When the children heard her sobbing, naturally they followed her example. In no time the playground was an annoying and out-of-control spectacle of weeping. Other teachers and other classes entered the playground from the school, and confused questions filled the air that had moments earlier been rich with laughter. Simpson noticed Turp pushing through the crowd, moving in his direction.

He nonchalantly swung about-face on his trotter. But before he could take a step toward the building, Turp had advanced ten feet on him at least, and screeched, "Call the police!" firing each word like a cannonball.

"Look, Turp," he said, turning, "I can tell you what they'll say--"

Before he could explain, she cracked him in the head with her yardstick.

"Go. Just go," she said, with actual tears, leaning into him, shoving his shirt up his back with her wings.

"Jesus Christ, Turp. Lighten up."

One of the other chicken teachers pulled Turp away, whispering into her ear and looking back at Simpson. He stuck out his tongue.

"Chickens got no cruise control," he said.

A duckling and a piglet appeared next to him. The piglet bounced a basketball on the asphalt.

"Mr. Simpson, you going to call the police?" said the piglet. Simpson watched the basketball. He yawned and walked backward toward the steps.

"The police, the president, the national guard," he said.

He cupped his forefeet over his snout: "Calling all cars," he said and grinned.

The piglet and the duckling smiled at each other and slapped forefoot to wing, and said, "Yeah, alright, Coach, cool."

The duckling flipped a cigarette into the side of his bill.

"Can the butt, Lawrence," said Simpson. "You want to get me in a soup?"

He backed up the steps, then raised his whistle and blew hard, making nothing but spit. He growled. What the hell had happened to that pea?

He threw his forefeet skyward to attract attention and shouted, "Yo! Listen up, everybody. Red alert! Battle stations!"

A lamb looked attentively up at him.

"Hello, Terry," said Simpson, jokingly muffling his mouth with a forefoot. "Out of quarantine, I hope?"

The lamb replied with a blank stare.

"Alright, everybody," Simpson shouted, "I'm declaring a holiday. Fun, fun, fun until the buses get here."

The students squealed, mooed, and screeched.

"Coach, can we go home?" someone quacked from the back.

Simpson frowned.

"Who said that? No, stupid. You can't go home."

Everyone groaned. "And I don't want to see any more cigarettes, kapesh?"

Simpson turned and opened the door to go inside. A donkey, one of the English teachers, poked his shoulder from behind.

"What are you doing, Simpson?"

"What kind of question is that, Wadley? Leading up to something intelligent, I hope."

"You can't just let everyone go."

"Where've you been, Wadley? You got to get out more. Well, here's some news. I'm going to call the kid's parents. Adios."

Simpson pushed through the door and started down the hallway. Wadley brayed after him at the door.

"You? Mr. Tact? I think otherwise."

"Think otherwise all you like, Heehaw," Simpson said, turning the corner toward the Principal's office.

He could hear Turp blubbering into the phone behind the

door. Simpson pouted with his mouth: "Oh, boo hoo hoo."

He turned the knob and sagged into the room, then flopped into Hardwell's deep black chair. Turp lowered the telephone into its cradle. A fan whirred in the window. Principal Joe Hardwell, a bull, leaned against the wall, puffing on his fancy carved pipe.

"I think Wadley missed his enema appointment again," Simpson said.

Turp and Hardwell exchanged looks.

"What?" said Simpson, flipping his forefeet into the air.

Turp wiped tears with her wings. "Why didn't you do something? What was going through that tiny little mind of yours? What were you thinking?"

"Just you wait a cotton-picking minute there, darling," he said, hugging his forelegs across his breast, leaning back in Hardwell's chair, and stretching his trotters onto the top of Hardwell's desk. Hardwell puffed his pipe.

"First of all, that fellow could be anybody. He might even be a friend of the family. I don't know. But you don't know either, Turp," Simpson said.

"He stuffed the child into a bag, Coach Simpson."

"Well, yeah, he took him in a bag, but he was also driving a milktruck."

"So?"

"So how many goatnappers drive milktrucks? I've never heard of that."

"So?"

"So nothing. That's all I have to say. Take your best shot, dumpling."

Turp closed her eyes and shook her head. Hardwell motioned with the mouthpiece of his pipe.

"Listen, Shorty. Janet has a valid point. This child's parents are liable to ask some darn tough questions." He jabbed the air with the pipe. "Darn tough."

"Hey, my conscience is clear," said Simpson, and swiveled from side to side in Hardwell's chair.

Turp opened her eyes and clucked. "You think you're some big shot sitting there, Coach Simpson," she said.

Simpson shrugged. "No, I don't."

"But you're not. You're just a pig with a whistle."

Simpson's curled tail tweaked beneath him in his trousers. He pointed a forefoot at Turp and said, "You know, Turp, you're beginning to get on my nerves."

Turp stood, glared at him, and moved to the door.

"In due time, in due time," she said. "In due time I hope a great many things `get on your nerves'--the police, the county school board, and the poor child's parents. Yes, especially the parents. I'm sure they will be very interested in your version of this incident, Coach Simpson."

Hardwell puffed on his pipe. He blinked as Turp slammed the door.

"Maybe you should go home, Shorty," said Hardwell.

Simpson read an insinuation in Hardwell's suggestion.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Janet's right, you know. Some darn tough questions are going to come down the Pike." He pointed with his pipe. "Darn tough."

"I don't care about the police."

"I don't either," said Hardwell, looking down at some papers on his desk with a sleepy droop to his eyes.

"Then what are you talking about?"

"You know as well as I do, Shorty. If a child is allowed, however inadvertently, to leave the premises of a public schoolground..."

Simpson tried to help him along by nodding, "Yes, yes?"

"Well, the proper procedure would necessarily be, in such a case, from an administrator's point of view, of course..."

"What?"

"That we call the parents."

"Call them, for crying out loud."

"We called them. They're on their way."

Simpson cleared his throat and sat erect, removing his trotters from the desktop.

"I probably should talk to them, then," he said, quietly nodding to himself, making a note of it. He looked at his watch. He stood and straightened his clothes.

"Do I look okay?"

"You look just like you ought to look, Shorty," said Hardwell, "Like hell."

"Maybe I should go home."

"Perhaps you might at that. I don't think the circumstances require your presence. Legally, I mean, that is."

Simpson felt faint as he walked down the hallway. Hardwell's raspberry-scented pipe-smoke lingered inside his snout, making him ill. He stopped by the water fountain and enjoyed a long drink. He looked up and wiped the wet flat of his snout with the back of his foreleg. He gazed down the long, empty hallway, and through a dirty window. He could see two police cars in the parking lot already. Why do they need two, he wondered. For some reason, he felt as if a large sack of cement had been flopped onto his back. Only natural, he decided. But he wasn't about to let Turp load all that guilt on him. He moved resolutely down the hallway toward the police cars. No need to let Turp fill their investigation with chicken nonsense. They would appreciate a good, sound, level head.

But he paused at the door. Through the door's window he could see Turp talking to a police boar. He could see

the donkey Wadley talking to a another cop. A third cop, a black-and-white cow, was hunkered down to talk to a group of third-graders. Simpson didn't see anyone who looked like parents.

He could tell parents when he saw them. He had seen enough in his time, had avoided more than his share in places where, if real justice existed, parents ought not to be. But now, no parents to be seen. Good, Simpson said to himself, and stepped outside with the true and level-headed version of the story.

CHAPTER IV

A PRAYER FOR A LONG-GONE GOAT

Nobby walked through everyone's view of the television, carrying his white bed pillow. The pillow glowed in the t.v. light. He slapped Wilber, the oldest kid, on the back of the head behind the bumps Wilber liked to call horns, then told him to move off the sofa and find the t.v. guide. Nobby liked walking around the house dressed only in his underwear and his tee shirt, walking in front of the television anytime he pleased. As the new father in the house, he had to set down the rules. He liked watching wrestling instead of the news, particularly since Bethel's smart-alecky kids said professional wrestling was for dopes. He liked being called a dope. Call me a dope some more, he said: I'll watch wrestling all night.

Besides, the t.v. news was depressing, and he had enough misery weighing him down, what with Peter getting kidnapped, his wife Bethel sticking him in the side with a pair of scissors, and his back trouble keeping him out of work.

He spread out across the sofa and looked around the room at the faces of all the kids he had agreed to feed, all

the way from the two-year old on up to Wilber, who was ten, maybe nine, in the fourth or fifth grade. The five-room house was packed full of kids he had picked up when he married Bethel, who was divorced, pregnant, and unemployed at the time. She was glad to get him. Nobby's sisters always said he was a catch--the handsomest goat in his family, and the snazziest dresser.

Now everything was upside down, as if Nobby had waited all his life looking for something and had just fallen into a hole and dropped clear out of sight. He was no longer handsome or snazzy, and Bethel was no longer divorced, pregnant, or unemployed--she worked as a receptionist for a dumptruck company, making good money--and Nobby had jerked his back out of whack at his own job at the paint store, and now he stayed home all week, unable to work a lick. He had been married just two years, and already his wife was supporting him. The thought of it depressed him so much he didn't want to go back to work anyway.

His doctor told him the back would heal in a few days if he wore the neck brace all the time. Nobby tried it for most of the first day, but took it off because it scared Tidbit, the family cat. She hid behind the pile of automobile tires in the yard and hissed. Nobby hated the cat anyway, but not as much as he hated wearing the neck brace.

He knew the back would heal without the neck brace

anyhow. Who did doctors think they were? He looked like a fool or an astronaut with that thing on. Everytime he visited the doctor, on Tuesdays and Fridays, he wore it, and the doctor would remove it and say that he bet it felt good to have it off. Nobby would agree, then the doctor would pound at Nobby's neck and ask him if it hurt, and Nobby would wince and say yes. The doctor would ask him if he was wearing the neck brace all the time. Nobby wanted to say that hell, no, that he never planned on going back to that damn job anyway, that he was looking through the papers every Sunday at the classifieds.

But he knew the doctor would turn him in. After all, the doctor had been hired by the paint store to tell Nobby to go back to work. Nobby simply had outsmarted the system. The doctor eventually would figure out a way to get at him. But for now, back pains could not be verified. The doctor and the paint store had to take Nobby at his word. He would stay home from work until they came with a wheelbarrow and took him. And that was unlikey since he never was much good at selling paint.

He had been out of work for long enough to get used to cleaning house. Bethel always came home with a headache and a gripe about her boss and she didn't want to do it. Nobby spent the first three weeks of his back pain drinking beer, making cheese toast, and learning how to play all the t.v.

game shows, but when he had raised hell with Bethel for not doing the laundry--"Good Lord, baby, I've been wearing the same shorts for a week,"--they had a knock-down-drag-out, and she stabbed him in the side with her scissors. Since then he'd been cleaning house.

Staying at home had more advantages than he had expected, though, like a secret he had uncovered in a cave. He could see all the mail before anybody else, and could make the kids do whatever he wanted them to do whenever they came home from school. They always complained that they had homework to do, but he knew better.

Bethel's kids were dumb as dirt. They never did any homework that Nobby knew of. He always said "Yes, you have homework and there it sits" as he pointed to the wash on the line or a sink full of dishes.

Peter had been a lame-brain, too. As much as Nobby hated to speak ill of the dead or good-as-dead, he had to face up to what he knew to be true. He tried to show Peter how to change the oil in the car, but the kid was off in dream-land somewhere. All Peter had on his brain was monsters and dinosaurs. He had a wild imagination, but that just proved he had inherited his real father's mental problems, and not that he was a little genius, as his mother supposed.

While Nobby was no great shakes himself, Bethel's

previous husband, Duke, had been a true fruitcake. He had a respectable job driving bulldozers, but he wanted to work with explosives. He made homemade bombs in the shed, with all the kids standing around watching, eating peanut butter sandwiches and picking their butts, sometimes even handing him tools. Bethel said she never interfered, and Nobby said it didn't sound like the Bethel he knew. She said that she had learned a lot over the years, and had changed.

Duke had been out in a little motor boat on the lake one night for reasons known to only him and the Lord; and at about midnight some teenagers camping on the shore saw a flash of light, then heard a loud ker-thump follow. They felt boat pieces landing around them like rain, and when they got up for breakfast, they found Duke's bloody red britches stuck to the top of their tent.

Nobby like to tell the story because it tied a neat knot in the line from the past. Nothing could come back to haunt him. He would never have married Bethel if her former husband still had been a loose end. A small army of kids to feed was bad enough.

They never needed an alarm clock in the house. One kid or another would wake up at any given hour all night long, and move around in the house, as if some spring inside them had busted so they couldn't just lie in bed until a normal hour and pretend to be asleep.

Nobby spent his mornings helping Bethel fix bowls of cereal all around, and keeping every kid from throwing food, leaning back in the chairs, or knocking over their juice glasses. He did his chores after everyone left the house, when he found himself with the t.v. and the two-year old. He saved the dishes for the kids to do after school.

Peter was supposed to wash the dishes on the day he was kidnapped. They sat in the sink until after Bethel returned from work. In the crazy day that followed the news of the kidnapping, with the police and reporters running around, setting their drinks on the furniture, telling dirty jokes to the kids, the dishes just sat. Nobody washed them. Bethel never even said word one about it.

Nobby assigned Peter's chores to the other kids. The preacher and Nobby's in-laws kept filling Bethel with false hope. Nobby knew better, however. He even began giving Peter's clothes to Burt, who was one size smaller. The preacher could pray for Peter all he wanted, the cub scouts could comb the woods all weekend long, and Bethel could hang posters of Peter's face in the corner laundries until she wondered who the face in the photo was herself.

Nothing would change the fact that Peter had disappeared without a trace. The cops had no suspects, no leads, no nothing. Nobby had almost even given up on the ten-thousand dollar life insurance payoff he knew was due him.

The thought of giving it up caused Nobby a physical pain. He could understand if the insurance company felt the same way, it just didn't make him feel any better. Insurance companies were the biggest frauds in the civilized world, and the banks were in on it with them. They had so many college-educated investigators turning over every rock, trying to come up with some evidence to prove you wrong. Who could go against them? Ten-thousand dollars was a lot of money, it would pay for a lot of rock-turning.

Nobby watched the faces of all the kids in the gloomy light of the t.v., most of them asleep now. Bethel snored in the easy chair with her hind-hooves on a stool. She had her mouth open. Nobby sighed. His neck brace sat next to the telephone. Everything he saw in the room made him depressed.

Since he had married Bethel, he had not made a friend. Not one. The only animal with any sense he had met was the pig school teacher, the one he had gone up to in mudbath. And he had seen the pig on television a couple of times when nothing else was on but news. The pig had been a witness. He probably even knew about trolls. He was college-educated and taught school. The pig could figure out a way of pulling the wool over the insurance company's eyes. He knew where the pig worked. Nobby would go see him at the school, and would pick up a six pack on the way.

CHAPTER V

PIG WITH A WHISTLE

Simpson spun under the basket and waved his forelegs for the ball. Tadpoles of sweat slid across the flat of his snout, tickling his nostrils. He waved at Farley's fat, tee-shirted frame and blurted his name. Farley's eyes showed panic. Snorts and grunts and the squeak of sneakers on wood smacked in the air. Farley, he shouted, Farley, Farley, Farley, FARLEY. But Farley bounced the ball to some worthless pig, some jerk they had recruited to avoid disqualification from bad turnout. Cooper, Cooper, Cooper, COOPER, shouted Simpson, and waved his forelegs like signal flags. Damn church pig league basketball, thought Simpson.

He watched the ball bound off the backboard and careen over the heads of both teams. Some wheezer with white nostril hairs got to it first and sucked it in, waiting for his teammates to cross midcourt. He passed it and the ball crisscrossed down the court against the typical zero defense of Farley and Higgins, and one huge pig that should never in a million years be able to leave his feet floated into the air for a layup. Simpson caught Farley's eye and threw him a gesture: I was open for Chrissake.

Simpson lifted his shirt and mopped the flat of his snout, baring his belly to the crowd of Baptists. Jesus, thought Simpson, why did God curse pigs with snout sweat? He lowered the jersey and watched Farley huff back on offense, Farley's jowls puffed, his eyes cast down with his chin in his chest as the flabby pig ran upcourt looking at his brand new hightop sneakers, slinging his forelegs, snorting sweat from the end of his snout. Simpson yelled at the pig dribbling the ball up the court, Higgins, Higgins, for crying out loud, HIGGINS. But Higgins dribbled forward like a maniac, lunged from the foul line, and shoved the ball at the backboard. Oh, boy, Simpson said when the other team grabbed the rebound: why am I busting my ass for these clowns? He doubled over for breath, looked at his knees, and waited for the snout sweat rivelets to leak out of his nostrils and slip onto the floor. He shook his head and straightened. Farley, he yelled, Farley, Farley, FARLEY. He waved his forelegs in the air. Farley drove with the ball and a short pig stole into him and stripped it. Simpson watched as the other team sailed past his own team, as if the pigs on his team were sinking collectively in quicksand, and taking it under advisement not to struggle, stood in mockery of the the zone strategy Simpson had mapped out for them, stood with their mouths open and their curly tails drooping in their shorts. The margin between the

scores was widening. Doesn't anybody on this team pass the ball? said Simpson, throwing his forelegs at his teammates.

Nobody talked to him. They had expended too much energy and emotion just breathing. I never knew I could sweat so much, Farley was saying, bent and snorting at the shiny floorboards. Simpson groaned and puffed forward into the wide pink bodies under the basket. The ball bounced up the backboard, then back on the rim, then finally fell into the grunting bunch, and Simpson climbed over a small pig's hunched back and grabbed at the ball. Foul! called the official. What! Simpson squealed back at him: Jump ball, Ref! Jump ball! But Simpson knew there was no justice in church pig league. He had fouled out of every game.

After the foul shots had been made, Simpson dribbled the ball down court and tried to catch his breath. He passed the official and said pleasantly, Let me play, okay, Ref? But the official wouldn't talk to him either. The top of Simpson's head and the back of his neck began to cook. He looked from side to side to fake out the pig who grunted in his face, and then he began swapping the ball from forefoot to forefoot as he dribbled. But his mind wandered to a nice cold beer after the game. He eyed the basket and the pink heads bobbing, the forelegs waving frantically and the sneakers that squeaked on the ends of puffy pink pig legs and tube socks. Simpson juked to one side and cut back.

"He's going in!" He shouted, and then, "No, he's going to pass the ball to RODNEY!"

Predictably, Rodney held up his forelegs when he heard his name. I'll be damned, grunted Simpson with a snort. Instead, he pivoted and shot the ball himself from forty feet.

"He shoots!" yelled Simpson. The ball made a swish as it passed through the hoop. "Yes!" said Simpson, and pumped the air, "Betchur ass!" The official blew a whistle in his face.

"What," said Simpson, whirling.

"Techincal foul!" said the official with a jabbing motion.

"For what!" said Simpson, but the official would not talk to him. The official turned his back. Farley walked by, looking at the toes of his new white shoes. Simpson pulled on the string of his own whistle, recently refit with a brand new pea. He lifted it from where it hung against his wide pink chest inside his jersey, where he always kept it hidden for just such an outrage, and pushing his snout within a foot of the round part of the back of the official's head, blew into the whistle with all his might, causing the pea inside to whir with spit.

The official's shiny head snapped around and his rubbery ears wobbled. Simpson stepped forward. He could go

snout to snout with the best of them. Boos rained down from the hot lights, and Simpson could feel his teammates melting away around him into the wide flat glossy boards of the big Baptist gymnasium. Church pig league had the most viscious crowds, and the stupidest officiating imaginable. Simpson had just escalated the game at the strategic point anyway; it was as lost as a lost game could be. He hoped the Baptists booed their guts out. He was going to sit in the car and try to find a good country song on the radio.

He hated playing at the Baptist gymnasium. The Baptists, who didn't believe in nakedness, had no showers. They had no young pig cheerleaders with pom poms and pleated skirts. He wondered how the Baptist pigs could take life so seriously and yet be so bad at basketball. Maybe they doubled as the choir. Losing to the Baptists meant an embarrassing certainty of finishing out the season dead last. Simpson hoped his team realized that fact. He had reminded them of it before the game, and he would remind them again when they came out.

He rolled his ears and rubbed the top of his head in his YMCA towel, walking outside beneath the stars. The black, quiet night seemed to go on forever. He could see the blinking red light of what he hoped was a UFO sliding past the stars. He wanted it to come down and get him. He wanted to just get the hell out.

As he walked into the jammed church parking lot in his rotten-smelling orange-and-black uniform, he felt unfairly pinned to the earth. He wanted to go somewhere, somewhere with nude dancers and cold beer. Something had changed in his life. He had never been much of a beer drinker, but two nights before he had sat in the bleachers of his school's gymnasium and killed three a six pack with that abducted kid's stepdad. By the time they had gotten to the last two cans, the beer was lukewarm, and they drank it anyway. He even left the door unlocked when they left. Someone could have walked right in and stolen the basketballs.

He had broken his rule about parents in general, and goats in particular. He had even sat in Nobby's car, talking to three in the morning, in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven. Before Nobby drove him back to the school, they had gone into the store, drank a cup of putrid coffee, and played a video game called Astro Blasters.

His life had taken a seedy turn. The entire time he talked to the goat, who was unemployed and was nicknamed "Nobby," he wondered why he was doing it, even felt as if he were lifting out of his own body and watching himself in the car and the bleachers from above, as if he had become an angel. He wondered if he had fallen asleep, or if he had a tumor in his head.

Suddenly, walking through the parking lot, he felt

lost. Where had he parked his car? He could remember, could visualize parking it right where he stood. He turned a full circle, sweeping his gaze across the cars. He could still hear the muffled thuds of the crowd from inside the gym. Beetles hit the light above his head. He saw no car that resembled his own. He spat a curse, then proceeded on a search down each row of bumpers. He stopped when he saw the milktruck.

Inside the truck, a cigarette glowed, moved.

Now what would be the chances of that? Simpson imagined himself a hero for a moment, spotting the troll by accident. Then the truck's driver started the engine, and the truck began rolling away. Of course the city must have been overflowing with milktrucks just like the one that had grabbed Peter. No doubt the police had checked them all, had given all the truckdrivers the bright-light-in-the-eyes, the "we know you did it" speech. Maybe this driver even was a cop, a police department plant trying to uncover a killer among the milktruck drivers.

The milktruck moved around the line of cars and down the row in which Simpson stood. He stepped back and pretended he was again looking for his car. As the headlights fell across the pavement next to him, the truck's brakes squeaked, and the truck stopped. The driver turned off the engine, then the headlights. A cigarette flew onto the

asphalt from inside the truck, leaving an orange trail of sparks.

A large figure stepped out in sections, his huge head lifting from out of the darkness of the truck. He wore a white shirt and white trousers, and they seemed to glow against the dull gray backdrop of the parking lot. Simpson leaned at the dark with his snout. Couldn't be, he thought. Then the figure grinned.

His teeth shone like a moon.

"I found you," said the troll.

A breeze moving across the parking lot took a newspaper with it. Simpson's tanktop lifted slightly on his back. He told his leg to move. The leg wasn't listening. In fact, his entire body had closed down like a bank on a holiday. But his neck moved, and he could jerk his head around with it. He looked around at his feet to see if he had stepped in cement, then at the gymnasium in the hope of seeing the Baptists exiting toward the parking lot. Panic even would have been helpful, but he could not move from the spot to try it. The troll stepped toward him. He should have run, should have followed his instincts like a dumb animal. But he had talked himself out of it.

The troll produced a package, a thick envelope, from a back pocket. He breathed down on Simpson, and Simpson looked up slowly, as if he stood with his trotters against a tree.

The troll pulled open the front elastic on Simpson's shorts. Simpson whimpered. He felt the odd tips of the troll's three fingers, and the cold envelope as the troll slid it into the shorts against his belly, then popped it into place with a snap of the elastic.

"This is three hundred dollars," he said. "I'm paying you for the kid."

Simpson nodded.

"Do you understand?" the troll repeated, one word at a time, as if talking long distance on a telephone.

Simpson nodded quickly.

Then, again one word at a time, the troll said, "Give this money to the kid's parents. Understand?"

Simpson nodded. But he did not understand at all. He had never known anything more clearly than that he did not understand. As the troll turned without looking back and disappeared into the blackness behind the milktruck's windshield, Simpson found himself gulping at the air for breaths. The truck's engine growled awake and the headlights flared on and blinded him. The truck lurched forward, roaring past him, the tires nearly running over his feet. Hmmmm, thought Simpson, shimmying like a jellyfish, then realizing he could move again. He felt as if a rift had opened in the earth before him, as if death himself had painted him tip to tip with butter and then let him go.

The doors of the gymnasium opened on the hill and light poured from within. Simpson sat down on the ground. Hello, parking lot, he said. He closed his eyes. Please, God, don't let me think about all this.

CHAPTER VI

RING OF FIRE

Peter stared into his water glass, watching the wet, curved world, the white flat tabletop, and the dull silver shininess of the fork, the spoon, and the butter knife next to Sweet's hands. The troll moved a quarter with a thick red fingernail, sliding it in circles around his paper napkin. Johnny Cash music lifted up from the jukebox, a song about falling into a burning ring of fire. The waitress waddled to the end of their booth and said Yeah?

Peter watched her in the side of his water glass--a duck hen in a light blue dress and a crayola-sized blot of lipstick on the end of her bill. She jotted down Sweet's words, recording coffee-black, the troll's words slurred, falling out. Sweet slowly combed his sparse, wispy thin hair with his hand, then rolled his basket-shaped head around on his neck, and Peter could hear the tight muscles popping.

Peter stared. His mother would slap him for doing it, but he hadn't seen her for how many days? He had been thinking about her but hardly could remember what she looked like, and he wanted to watch the troll's ugly face, wanted

to watch how it moved, how the parts worked. His stepfather Nobby had lied to him, had told him not to believe in giants or monsters. But here sat both, a giant monster who talked, talked about being tired from driving all night, from staring into headlights, from packing everything he owned in his life and moving away. He had stuffed the backseat of the old white car with stale smelling boxes, had crammed dinged pots and pans and bent boots and wads of clothes from the floor to the windows. When cars heading north passed in the night, their car lights swept across the boxes and junk stuffed behind Peter's head. He would turn if he was awake and watch the shadows turning the inside of the car like the pages of a book.

Sweet still wore Al's dairy clothes in the night as he drove, shifting on the bench car seat, rubbing his legs, smoking Lucky Strikes that glowed orange in the dark of the car. He said of the night that was the best time to drive, and asked Peter what it felt like to be with a real monster with a real car taking him to Florida. Peter said it was fine. Sweet said that they should stop to eat, and Peter stared and said that, too, was fine. Peter felt small and unimportant, like a pebble. We are dead, a voice said in his mind. Peter nodded. Yes, he said to the voice. Florida means death.

Sweet now had a menu in his red hand. He heaved a

long, tired breath, turned his oversized head to the duck waitress. She waited with her pencil ready, her bill sagging with an unamused frown, and he continued scanning the laminated pictures of waffles and vegetable pies.

He said, "Well, I think I'll have..."

Then he stopped, looked some more.

"You want me to come back?"

"No, no. I'm ready..." he said, and continued to run his sleepy eyes over the pictures of slops and vegetable plates and doughy jelly dishes.

"Oh, what the hell," Sweet finally said, "Bring me some scrambled eggs."

"What?"

"Eggs. Scrambled. And coffee. Black." He flicked an ash from the end of his cigarette.

A droplet of water inched down Peter's glass. Three dark mound shaped truck driver no-necks turned on their barstools, then back to their food. Johnny Cash stopped singing. The mechanism sounds in the jukebox refiled the record. Outside, a gas pump went cha-ding, cha-ding, and the outside voices fell far away on the other side of the plate glass window.

"We don't serve no damn egg-eaters," the waitress said, "Wyn'chu get on the hell out?" and she pointed her pencil toward the gas pumps in the parking lot.

Peter watched the duck waitress move her mouth in the small pin of her white head in the center florescent reflection of the small round water glass. He watched a droplet of water gleam and roll down the smooth surface and spread into a ring on the table. The waitress grew smaller in the glass, storming away. Then the three large dark shapes slid off their stools one at a time, and moved to the end of the booth. Peter looked up. Two bulls and a boar, tattooed, nodding, smoking cigarette nubs, breathing laboriously, had planted themselves there, just as if they waited for a turn at something, as if they were a group by reason of some common business, to unload a truck or to play a pinball machine.

The bulls, one in a jean vest, the other vestless, wore tee shirts, visible by a wedge which hung above their open, Western shirt collars. They wore thick brass nose rings and their horns sawed short like Marine bulls on recruiting posters. The boar had a cantalope of tobacco in his jowl and he rolled it, and his eyes were small and mean, like knife slits. The duck waitress slapped down her order pad and quacked to herself from the other side, cursing. Peter stared at the side of the smooth, cool water glass. He looked at Sweet's hands on the table, thick and red, hard from work, singed by magic, wrapped with blood-black vines of tight skin. The long, chipped nails on the ends of the

three fat fingers of one hand and a wrist that swelled back into a rolled white sleeve lifted to the troll's mouth, and reappeared on the table, flicking ashes from the gray end of his Lucky Strikes cigarette into a glossy black plastic ash tray. The fingers worked the cigarette delicately, like only fingers could do, precise movements from which Peter could not pull his eyes, the movements of a card trick. The hand rose with the cigarette, and Sweet blew smoke toward the dark blurs that Peter watched again in the water glass.

The boar, the shortest of the three big mammmals, spoke up, and planted a forefoot on the glossy table with a thunk, like a plate.

"Hey, kite-head. Make me happy, okay?" he said, around his tobacco, and he issued a wet, double-syllabic snort. The bulls made deep low affirmative grunts in the back of their necks and nodded. Outside, a tractor trailer rig rolled into the parking lot, pulling up to the pumps. They all watched it. The troll slid the quarter across the table with a tiny noise. He lowered the cigarette and flicked its ashes. He turned the quarter onto its edge and tapped the table with it. Peter looked at the thick hands. He looked into the water glass and watched the tiny clock, the infitesimaly small second hand sliding around like a creature on a microscope slide, an entire diner moving beneath his eye, the blinking sign that said eat and

disappeared and then lit again, eat, eat, eat, and the growing glint of weeping water, forming and sliding down as little points of light and color on the round water glass lens. No one sees me, thought Peter. Sweet tapped the flat white table with the edge of the quarter and said I want a song, then with his small yellow eyes looked straight at the top of Peter's head and released a breath of smoke that curled outward, then turned his wide, tooth-heavy mouth into a soft, purple-gummed smile and sank into the quiet of the cha-ding, cha-ding of the gas pump filling the deep tank of the tractor trailer on the other side of the plate glass that stood between the inside of the too-lit diner and the dark endless North Florida nothingness of trucks and woods and sand and highway. The three fat animals stood at the end of the booth as if they were boulders that had rolled down from a cliff, fixed except for the ocean waves of their inhaling and exhaling. I am invisible, thought Peter, inside my glass of water.

Sweet finally turned his huge head toward the huffing mammals. He looked at his cigarette, then ground it out gently in the ashtray. He reached into his shirt pocket and extracted a dirty cloth pouch with a string tied top. He closed his big three-fingered hands around the bag and shook it. From inside the pouch encompassed by his hand, a hushed chinking sound emerged, as if the troll had stuffed penneys

or poker chips into the bag. Then Sweet stopped and he turned again to the three fat animals, and they waited, breathing more softly, unaccountably patient, with looks of peace that did not seem to fit their heavy faces.

"Tomorrow, your lives will be different," he told them. Sweet said it calmly, as if he had told them something profoundly sad but sure to happen, as if he had blessed them, in fact.

When the two bulls and the boar shuffled to their stools, the waitress quietly began mopping the counter with a rag. After a moment, the jukebox whined back to life--as if it had stopped because it had been unplugged. Then the waitress appeared next to the table, standing in the exact same way as when Peter and Sweet had first sat down, and suddenly everything was the same, even the sound outside, as it had been before. We have stayed still in time, Peter said to himself. He watched the sign in the window blinking, eat, eat, eat.

But now the duck waitress began differently, as if she had never seen them before, as if the troll had told everyone, the bulls, the boar, the duck, to get back in their places and try again. The waitress politely took their order. The troll ordered buttered toast and again, black coffee. He ordered coffee and a waffle for Peter. The bulls and the boar pulled at their food slowly with their

mouths, as if they ate bowls of paste.

"How will their lives be different tomorrow?" said Peter, after the waitress had poured the hot coffee and waddled away.

Sweet blew smoke from between his interlocking teeth. He blew steam off the surface of the coffee, sipped it. He glanced toward the row of stools, and the three hefty animals. They moved like machines.

He said, "Tomorrow they'll be dead," then nodded once.

He downed his coffee, slurping, then set his cup onto his saucer with a precise clink.

"That's different alright," said Peter.

The waitress waddled to their booth, poured more black coffee. She looked sad. Maybe she would be dead by tomorrow, too.

Peter spent the rest of the night thinking about the sad faces in the diner. He wondered how the troll would do it, though he never doubted that the troll could. Maybe the diner would catch fire just as the milktruck pulled out of the lot. My god, the doors are locked, one of the animals would scream. There would be no way out. Everyone in the diner would be cooked. Johnny Cash would be singing on the jukebox..."I fell into a burning ring of fire...I fell down, down, down, but the flames got higher...and it burned, burned, burned...the ring of fire..."

Peter rode on the cot in the back of the milktruck, the darkness rocking around him, the shadows sliding, shifting. He was in Florida, moving mysteriously down the map. Would Sweet take him to Disney World, to Sea World? He pretended that he sailed across the ocean in the damp hull of a ship. He rocked in the dark and thought about pirates, about walking a plank into midair, about disappearing under the sea.

The troll had said that Peter needed to learn about magic and about baseball, and had brought a baseball, a bat and a used little-leaguer's glove with the name Terry on the side. The troll talked about what a good glove it was, how it fit Peter well.

"See, Peter, kid's size. Made for a goat."

Peter stared at the glove, he turned it. "Who's Terry?" he said. "Whose glove is this?"

The troll asked Peter if it were true that a goat would eat anything, would a goat eat an apple, for instance? Sweet made an apple appear. Peter looked around the hand. Something about the hand made it able to do magic. He could find no strings, no sleeve with apples in it. He frowned.

"No?" Sweet laughed, a low laugh, almost grunting. "Would a goat eat a head of cabbage?"

A purple cabbage sat in Sweet's palm. Peter looked around its sides as he would look at a globe of the world.

He looked up at Sweet's large triangular face. Sweet smiled, showing his teeth. Peter frowned.

"Would a goat eat a bag of nails?"

And a crumpled-looking paper bag appeared in the magical red hand, weighted with ten-penney nails.

"Nobody eats nails," he told the troll.

"Nobody eats nails," the troll repeated. He laughed again.

"You're not funny," said Peter.

The giant red face bent closer. The small yellow eyes glowed.

"You'll eat nails if I tell you to."

"No, I won't," Peter shouted. He was sure the troll was about to make him do it.

"You'll eat whatever I tell you to eat."

"You go to hell."

The troll straightened in the milktruck as far as he could.

"If I go to hell, I'll take you with me."

"Go to hell, go to hell, go to hell. Go to hell and don't come back."

"If I go to hell, I will come back. I'll come back to get you, Peter. And if I tell you to eat an apple, you'll do it. If I tell you to eat a cabbage, you'll do it. If I tell you to eat nails, you know what? You will eat nails."

Peter found something yanking him into the air, but the troll had not touched him. The back of Peter's head hit the roof of the truck. The troll wasn't doing it right. Don't use magic, Peter wanted to tell him. He shouldn't be able to use magic.

"Stop it," Peter said. "It's not fair."

Something threw him across the roof. The side of the truck slammed into him, jarring him to the bones.

"Never talk back," said the troll. "I can break you in two. Do you understand? You will never talk back to me. Not to me."

"You're not my father."

The troll tossed his head and Peter slammed into the front of the truck, then back, then into the side, then into the floor, again and again and again, but Sweet would not stop. Please, stop, Peter was trying to say. He felt like his bones would break. I'm little, he wanted to tell the troll. But the troll's magic slammed him again, throwing him flat on the floor. Peter wanted to say he was sorry. He wanted to apologize to the troll for talking back. He wanted to eat apples and cabbages and nails if he had to.

Something invisible clubbed him in the head. A flash of light went off inside Peter's skull, like a firecracker. He felt something warm and wet run down his neck. The thought of blood melted him, the thought that the troll had

killed him. He fell backwards, into unconciousness, and since he did not feel the floor hit his back, he thought he was flying.

When he woke, he lay in the cot, and he opened his eyes to the bright light of a Florida mid-afternoon. The back of the truck was stifling hot. Peter winced at the sunlight as he moved toward the front. The top of his head felt tender, matted with dried blood. The shoulder and collar of his shirt were stained a blackish red.

"Hello, Peter," said the troll, not looking in his direction. Peter tried to keep his balance on the floor of the truck cab. The front of the milktruck had only a driver's seat, and no place for a passenger to hold on.

"You've got to wash my shirt," he told the troll.

The troll snapped a look at him. Peter immediately recognized his mistake.

"Sorry," he said.

The troll smiled. "Don't lean on the door. Wouldn't want to lose you."

"Where are we going?"

"Far away, to a place called Centrifuge. It's near Homestead, in South Florida."

"Why?"

"My grandfather is there."

"Why do I have to go?"

"He wants to meet you."

Sweet pointed to a billboard.

"Look, Peter, an alligator farm. You want me to stop? You like alligators, don't you?"

"Why do I have to meet your grandfather?"

"You know, Peter, the first time I saw you, you were looking at alligators, at the zoo. You almost fell into the alligator pit."

"They're crocodiles."

"That's right. I was there that day."

"What were you doing at the zoo?"

"Following you."

Peter watched the signs on the side of the freeway.

"What's that?" he said, pointing.

"An emergency call-box, in case your car breaks down."

More signs flipped past.

"Who does it call?"

Sweet frowned.

"If you stop asking stupid questions, I'll teach you some magic."

"You stop asking me stupid questions if you want to teach me magic."

"Peter," the troll said with a warning tone. "Don't talk back."

"Sorry," Peter snapped. He leaned on the door.

"Don't lean on the door."

Peter pushed his full weight on the door.

"God damn it. I said don't lean on the door."

The troll jerked a wrist, and an invisible force threw Peter's feet, and his head cracked into the windshield. The troll's hand had not come near him. Magic. Peter fell into a ball and cried.

"Go ahead and cry, you little shit."

Peter kicked the door. The troll turned on the stereo. Peter kicked the door again, looking directly up at the troll from the floor. Sweet glared down at him and Peter found himself choking. He sucked at the air, but he couldn't breathe. He face fell forward, bent.

"That's what you get. If you're bad, you don't get to breathe. That's the new rule."

Peter kicked the door. He wanted out, he wanted to roll down the freeway, he wanted air, he wanted to die.

"Peter, there's a picnic area coming up. Would you like to stop and eat?"

Peter kicked at the door several times. He rolled on the floor. He was going to pass out.

"Be good now, Peter, and I'll stop. I'll teach you some magic."

Peter nodded and the troll let him breathe again.

The truck turned off the freeway, into a picnic area.

The parking lot was half full with cars and trucks.

As Sweet pulled the blood-stained shirt over Peter's raised forelegs, he said, "They won't believe you, Peter. No matter what you tell them, so just forget it."

As if to prove his point, the troll waved at a couple of elderly sheep as they got out of their car.

"Nice day," he said, and looked into the pale blue of the Florida sky. The looked back, up at the troll, down at the shirtless kid beside him.

"Yes, it certainly is," said the ewe, and the sheep moved toward the restrooms. Sweet took Peter's front hoof in one giant hand, and a bag of food in the other, and he said, "Everybody thinks I'm you're father but you."

"I have to go to the bathroom," said Peter.

"Come on, then," said the troll, yanking him along.

"No, I can go by myself."

"Like hell you can," said the troll. Peter tried to pull away from him, but the huge red hand squeezed harder.

Inside the restroom, Peter began to cry. He couldn't help it. He locked himself in one of the stalls, but the troll waited patiently just outside it. Peter could see his feet, then could hear him answer when the old ram sheep from the car said, "Where y'all from?"

"Texas," said the troll.

"What?"

"Texas."

"I'm from Georgia. You don't sound like you're from Texas. Where you headed?"

"Haven't made up our minds," said Sweet.

"What?"

"Disneyworld," Sweet snapped.

"What? Know where we're going?"

"Disneyworld."

"What? That's pretty good. You read minds, do you? What are you, a philanthropist? That your kid in there? What you going to do, eat him?"

Peter's heart raced. He flushed the toilet and opened the stall door. The old sheep was gone. Sweet stood by the door. He took Peter's hoof in his hand. The old sheep was drinking from the water fountain. He looked up at the troll and smiled, water dripping from his mouth.

The troll smiled back.

"Tomorrow, you'll be in Disneyworld," said the ram.

"You won't," said the troll.

"What?"

"Say hello to Mickey," the troll said, then smiled. Peter was trying to get the old sheep's attention, but the troll was already turning away, and the sheep was moving with his arched back and his wooly white head back to his car.

At the picnic table, Sweet handed Peter a sandwich bun wrapped in cellophane, a bun filled with something that looked and smelled like dog food.

"I'm not going to eat this," said Peter, then simply laid it flat on the table.

"Well, I'm going to have one. You can suit yourself."

The troll kept his tiny yellow eyes on Peter, raised an identical sandwich to his wide mouth and bit into it.

"You don't even want to try it?"

"Make me an apple and I'll eat it."

"You have to eat one of these if you want to do magic."

"Whose ever heard of a goat doing magic?" said Peter.

The troll's mouth dripped with the brown goo.

"All the better," he said, licking his fingers.

"What is it?" said Peter, lifting the sandwich and turning it.

"It's a very special sandwich. It's called a `Sloppy Joe'."

Peter bit into the side, tested the brown with the tip of his tongue. An odd sensation pierced him, like an electric shock.

"Good, isn't it?" said Sweet.

Peter took a larger bite. The lumpy brown substance flowed into his mouth, onto his tongue.

"I have more in the back of the truck if you want, lots

of it."

"What's it made from?" Peter said.

"Pork," said the troll, an odd smirk on his large red face.

"What's `pork'?" said Peter.

"Ah, what indeed," said the troll, breaking into a large, happy smile.

CHAPTER VII

TOMATO HELL

Sweet remembered the Homestead Air Force Base jets flying overhead, their contrails cutting scars in the calm, clear South Florida sky. As he drove down the highway and made the turn toward Centrifuge, even the swamp grass looked familiar, waving to him from the bog as the milktruck whistled past. He recognized the places where the goat tomato-pickers moved across the fields, bent away from the hot sun with wide hats on their heads, and large baskets of ripe tomatoes on their forelegs. The flies and mosquitoes came back to him, too, landing on him and biting him to welcome him back.

Peter chewed on a slice-of-Joe sandwich, smacking the bread with his flat goat teeth. He would need to file them into points to make him a good troll, nature not welcoming any major evolution in appetites. But he already had learned a few good manipulation spells, a few of the more harmless ones passed down from Sweet's grandfather. He had learned how to make a balloon burst, how to make a doorbell ring, and how to make water stink.

Peter asked if Sweet had a spell for everything,

compartmentalized in his brain. Sweet could remember stories about when he had used each one over the years. Sweet had used brain enlargement spells on the employees at the telephone company so that they could finally understand the problem with his bill. He had used magic in Mexico to force a barber, several busdrivers, and the short goat at his hotel into following his instructions when he could not make them understand him by shouting and waving his arms. He had used a sterilization spell on a towtruck driver who charged him sixty dollars, then left a banana sandwich on the seat of his car. He used magic when he played poker, but everyone else he knew did, too. He could make a car run with magic, but doing so depreciated the value faster than the normal rate, causing incredible stress on the parts.

The milktruck had made it the length of the State of Florida thanks to magic. Personally, Sweet knew nothing about mechanical jobs of any sort. But magic was a great substitute for skill.

Peter seemed to have no knack for spells himself. He certainly could not learn any of the more complex spells, the brain-wedger, the throat-choker, or the slow-death, the spells whoses names sounded like wrestling holds, without being a carnivore for more than a day. An dump truck drove by, heading North, and the goat driver waved lackadaisically.

Nobby was explaining to Peter the necessity for eating meat and having more elaborate and coniving magic than your neighbors when suddenly, the milktruck drove into a rotten cloud of air, an overpowering smell from the marsh grass and shaggy palmetto palms and the hot, sticky-sick whiteness of the flat Florida sky.

"Phew!" said Peter, covering the tip of his nose. "What is that?"

Sweet rolled up his window, his wide jaw set in a frown.

"I don't know. It's something new."

He set his small yellow eyes on the vanishing point of the narrow, two-lane blacktop, trying to discerne something obscured or concealed either up ahead or in the crevaces of his brain. How could he have forgotten such a smell? How could the trolls of South Florida allowed it?

Had his grandfather's grave been violated for the introduction of grotesque development, of a community living under a thick, mucky cloud of polluted air?

As he drove, he expected at any moment to drive into a row of fast food slop bars, honky tonky joints, and used car lots with colored plastic flags. He passed an old house that he recognized, where he remembered a thriving family of trolls had lived. He watched the house slip around the corner of his vision. The windows had been gouged, the

front door busted and loose, the inside now dark, and all past life and present signs of life removed. It belonged in a cemetery.

"The Johnsons lived there," he said.

"Not anymore," said Peter.

As they drove on the glinting black, sun-speckled road, the heat seemed to increase, until inside the truck it felt like the paint on the outside must be boiling. With the windows raised, they could hardly breathe.

"Don't you know an air-conditioning spell?" said Peter.

They zipped past the Welcome to Centrifuge sign, one of its legs rotten and buckled, the sign faded and twisted, with its back toward the sky.

The smell increased, as if a gas leaking from an open valve.

"There must be some factory, some giant refinery or plant of some kind producing that smell. But there's no sign of life. Someone has got to run it."

Sweet slammed on the brakes.

"What is it?" said Peter, looking for something in the road.

"This is it," said Sweet, looking to his side. A small dirt road had been cut into marsh grass higher than Peter's head. The end of the road disappeared into a curve. The milktruck whirred into reverse, then Sweet spun the steering

wheel and gunned the truck between the high, dust-covered rows of yellow grass.

"The smell is getting worse," said Peter, holding his nose and trying to make his face small.

Sweet could not deny that he was driving directly into the stinking cloud as he headed toward the old grave. His eyes began to tear, he could feel the stink moving across his skin, seeping into his clothes. He had never smelled anything so foul, the stink even was more powerful than the unnamed combinations Grandfather Bistle could conjure.

"What is it?" Peter said, crying.

"Stop crying. I can't help it," said Sweet, whipping the truck around the curves, filling the air with pale dust.

"It's hot and I can't breathe," said Peter.

"Shut up, Peter, shut up."

Sweet stomped his foot and scowled and the truck clipped the high grass on the curves, making the sound of brooms being pulled across the sides.

"You think I like it? They dug up my grandfather's grave. And there's nothing here. Nothing."

"Your grandfather's dead. You told me we were coming to see your grandfather."

Sweet roared. He inflated his wide red chest, ripping the white shirt. Peter fell into a ball on the floor. Sweet squeezed the steering wheel in his hands, pulling on

it, spinning the truck around the curves. Peter thrased on the floor. Sweet's concentrated on the choke spell, drove it down the small goat's throat. Peter kicked at the door.

"Do you know what happens to trolls when they die if they're mean enough and eat enough meat? They can come back, they can come back for one last meal. That's why you're here, Peter. I brought you here to keep my grandfather from haunting me for the rest of my life. I brought you here to feed you to the old---"

Sweet looked up at the curve just in time. The fat front-end of a dumptruck moved around it, spinning on the curve, chewing the road to dust, and heading for a collision with the milktruck. Sweet's reflexes, heightened by his anger at Peter and the world, jerked the steering wheel to the side, his muscular arms moving like fat red rattlesnakes. He lost control and the milktruck rerouted itself into a sea of broom-like grass, and Sweet fought with it, snarled at it, until the ground beneath the grass dipped down, dropping the truck, and shoving Sweet's face against the windshield. He dropped into blackness.

When he woke, he lay on his back, half on the side and half on the roof of the truck. Boxes and debris covered his legs, and the horrible smell of the air pulled at his gut. He could hear the whirring, clicking sound of South Florida insects. Sunlight fell through the windshield as if

through a magnifying glass, burning his eyes. Above him, the side door of the truck hung bent off its frame. Peter was gone.

Sweet dragged himself outside, dropped from the wreck into the waist-high grass. A sharp pain shot up his leg, and he stumbled. The white trousers were soaked on the side with blood.

The dust had settled. The sky seemed calm, soft with cloud wisps. If he walked thirty feet in any direction, no doubt there would be no sign of the truck, of Peter, of any life beyond that of the insects and the repugnant smell.

Sweet staggered through the heat, pushing aside the tall grass, until he found himself back on a thin curve of the dirt road. Which way should he walk? The smell repulsed him, but the other direction offered nothing for at least five miles. He could try to right the truck by himself, but he had no magic lifting or levitation spells for anything so heavy. And once righted, would it run? He would be better off finding another vehicle and disposing of the driver.

He cursed the driver of the truck that had forced him off the road for not stopping. Then he realized that he must have found Peter, must have rescued him. If the dump-truck had a radio, the place soon would be swarming with Florida State police. He picked up his pace, dragging his

leg, his head pounding with pain. He walked forward, toward the direction of his grandfather's grave.

Where was the office complex the pig-owned development company had removed the old troll's coffin to build? He saw nothing ahead, no signs, no buildings, nothing and no one at all. Then, all at once, he no longer needed to wonder why.

The sea of waving, shifting grass opened before him, and he saw the top of a mountain rise above it, a mountain of soft, glistening red so putrid that Sweet fell to his knees and immediately cast a brain-wedge removal on himself to avoid heaving his insides onto the ground.

Tomatoes, billions and billions of rotting, popping, spewing, leaking, malformed tomatoes, discarded dripping into a potent, poisonous sludge of a landfill for tomato farmers from hundreds of miles around--a mountain cooking and stewing in the oven of the South Florida sun, rising into a crusading assualt on the mucous membranes, coating the eyes and clothes and the skin as if they had been dipped in gasoline. Walls of tomatoes, higher than the trees, higher than anything around it, with roads cut through it for the dumptrucks, like an excavation in a desert of soft red goo. Flies and seagulls and black birds picked at it as if it were a sea of raw, red meat.

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CHAPTER IX

ESCAPE

Peter climbed out of the wrecked milktruck and ran, crashing through the stinging grass. The goat dumptruck driver clopped toward him, shouting in Spanish, his dark face barely visible ahead. Peter held his nose, the smell wrenching at him, pulling him inside-out.

"Run, run," he yelled at the driver, and ran past him onto the road.

The goat again said something Peter could not understand, pointing at the top of the milktruck, and moved back into the grass at the point where the truck had left the road. Peter could still see the truck's tilted back in the grass several dozen yards from where he stood.

"No, no. He's a troll, a troll," Peter shouted, and clutched at the driver's sleeve, pulling at the driver with all his might. The goat looked down at him for a moment, back to the truck, then said something in Spanish, ending in the word "troll." He scooped up Peter with a foreleg and bolted toward his truck. He pitched Peter up and into the cab, then climbed up himself.

"Vamos," he said, his eyes like two hot coals. The

truck shook as the engine chugged into life. Peter watched the back of the milktruck for a second, then turned forward in his seat. The driver spewed Spanish curses and crossed himself as he shifted gears.

CHAPTER X

RESURRECTION

Simpson heard the truck idling outside the gymnasium, and he poked his head through his office window, half-drunk, a bottle of Jack Daniels by the neck. His heart raced. The truck's driver, a filthy black goat, hopped down. He turned back toward the cab of his truck and held his forefeet into the air. A kid climbed out of the truck and into his grasp. Then the driver turned and set the kid gently onto the ground.

"Coach Simpson!" bleated the kid.

"Jesus Christ!" Simpson pulled his head back inside.

The troll had called him two days before, had told him to watch for the kid.

"You're going to kidnap him again? And you want me to arrange it, right?" Simpson asked, amazed at the absurd turn his life had taken.

"No. The kid will come to you first. You hold him until I get there."

Simpson slowly pulled open the door of the gym and let in the afternoon sun. Peter leaped in and hugged him. He reeked. Simpson peeled him off. Blood stained his shirt.

"Coach Simpson, call my Mom! I was kidnapped!"

"I heard."

The scraggly driver entered the gym. He offered his forefoot.

"This is Alfredo, Coach Simpson. He speaks Spanish."

"Hola," said Simpson.

Alfredo stunk, too. Both of them smelled as if they had been rolling in fermented slop.

"Did Alfredo call the police, by any chance?"

Peter turned to Alfredo, whose eyes jerked nervously.

Alfredo understood, and shook his head.

"No police," he said. "I go," he added, and backed out the door.

Peter ran outside and hugged Alfredo, then returned, bounding into the air.

"I didn't know how to get home, but we passed the school, and I knew I could come here."

He ran across the gym floor, his hooves making thunking sounds on the boards.

"I knew somebody here could call my Mother. I'm hungry, Coach Simpson. Got any pork? You can call the police if you want. I don't care. My mother's been asking about me, I bet."

"Everyday. But you know who's coming over later today? Your stepfather. You want to see him, too, don't you?"

"Yes! I want to see my stepfather!"

Peter smiled and twirled on the floor like a little ballerina. What a shame to waste all that enthusiasm on Nobby. Simpson wanted to grab Peter by the forelegs and shake him back into reality. But he didn't savor the job. He didn't want to have to be the one to tell the kid that he wasn't going back home. Nobby could do it.

After all, Nobby wanted the ten thousand dollars, and he could get it if the troll would mail him some evidence of the kid's demise, a hoof, perhaps. Here was the golden opportunity for which Nobby had waited all his life. Simpson wasn't about to rankle the troll, to return the kid to his mother, or to put the police on the alert. He would wait. If the troll never showed up, then he would let the kid go.

Of course, the entire scenario had not played out as he had hoped. He would come out the loser in the end. Nobby would buy the speedboat he had always wanted, the troll would fulfill whatever sick satisfaction he could get from a bowl of goat soup. Simpson simply would come out with his hide in one piece. No one the wiser. He would settle for that, considering the alternative.

CHAPTER XI

CAPTURE

Sweet knew no one would stop for him. The putrid stink of the vegetables had sapped his magical abilities. He ignored the cars blaring with their horns. Sweat stung the cut in his forehead, and his leg had begun to swell. His feet blistered as the hot asphalt softened the rubber soles of his boots. The pouch of pig's teeth sagged in his shirt pocket. He removed it and broadcast the teeth into the blowing swamp grass on the side of he road. His charms had not protected him.

When the Florida State patrol car rolled into the grass behind him and the cop whooped the siren to signal Sweet to stop, he turned his head slowly and sneered. While he would have prefered the long, airconditioned ride into town, he knew what his capture would mean. He knew how Florida treated carnivores. They had executed thirty in the past ten years, five times as many as any other state. He balled his fist and prepared to snap the cop's neck.

A troll with mirrored sunglasses squeezed out from behind the wheel, rising up as if in sections, his wide red face locked in a look of disapproval.

"Well, well, well," said the cop. "Been up to no good, have we?"

"I had an accident," said Sweet, pointing back down the road.

"You fellas are giving trolls in South Florida a bad name."

The cop handcuffed Sweet with a magic spell, then turned his back.

"Come along," he said.

CHAPTER XII

VACATION

Nobby's head made a thumping sound on the side window of the car. Peter slept in the backseat, his mouth on an open comic book. Simpson accorded Nobby full responsibility for an annoying pain a headache caused by the thump.

The car had just crossed the Georgia-Florida state boundary, and as Simpson watched the combination restrooms and picnicking area whiz by he imagined he was symbollically defying a definite, verbalized threat from the troll.

He figured he had changed, had gone through some sort of scarring rite of passage, that he now stood on the bigger-than-life side of something, slipping into a small greatness for which he had been posturing for years. While he couldn't forgive the headache caused by Nobby's head thumping on the window or the weird spin shot through his eyes by the four cups of coffee, he suddenly felt good about himself. It hardly mattered that the troll recently had been ridden the electric chair to eternity after his capture in Florida. Simpson felt defiant, not just of the troll and the troll's tough-guy telephone threats, but of all the petty animals in his life.

After all, it was the perceived possibility of impending danger that Simpson was standing up against. He would never forget his grandfather, a pale boar with one tooth in his head and who could barely walk, but who shuffled down the porch steps and out into the yard whenever a thunderstorm blotted the sky. He wanted to stand in the lightning, he would say, because lightning don't mean a damn. The chance that Granddaddy Simpson would have been fried in the yard on one of those breezy Georgia nights was slim, Simpson knew, but none of them really knew it at the time, and somehow the fact that the old boar had gone outside deliberately, had shuffled out into the rain and stuck his bristly snout into the air, seemed to have reduced his chances of being smitten even more. Who ever heard of someone struck by lightning who wanted to be? But in the minds of the entire family and town, Granddaddy Simpson was brave and a little bigger than life. Because the perceived danger was real to all of them, they hid inside the house. Simpson had taken enough psychology at college to see things clearly now.

He glared down his snout at the freeway, trying to ignore the sound of the goat's head rattling on the glass, a wobbly wheel on the wagon of his daydream. Simpson was pushing the car to limits unintended by the manufacturers of the thickly-gooped walls of its engine, the blackwall tires

whirring, the sun shimmying in mirages at the vanishing point in the road far ahead, the car and its three inhabitants barrelling up the freeway at seventy, one a pig with a headache and sagging eyes, the other two goats sharing a thin relationship. Simpson dared a cop to pull him over.

Hell, Simpson had been on television, in the newspapers. Cops kept up with the celebrities produced by crimes, whether the familiar faces belonged to criminals, victims or just plain old joes who happened to get involved out of some civic-mindedness or quirk of fate, as had been the case with Simpson, although Simpson's mind had muddied exactly into which category he himself actually fit.

Here was Simpson, then, quite the hero in the minds of the average fellow reading his morning paper with his bowl of slop and cup of coffee, and in contrast, the kidnapped goat's own stepfather, jobless, nicknamed Nobby by his old paint company buddies, producing the irritating sound of his head vibrating on the pig's car window, along with the fact that the goat had blubbered out periodic wet-sounding snores, or that he could sleep at all given the aggravation, not to mention the cash-layout and the wear-and-tear on Simpson's old Dodge Dart, that the five hundred mile drive was costing. And he had to drive, to boot. Nobby was always beered-up, or passed out against the door.

Oddly enough, the trip had been Peter's idea. The idea

struck Nobby well. After losing the possibility of collecting the life insurance, Nobby had been sour for weeks. When school let out for the Summer, all three of them were free. Peter's mother insisted that Nobby stay at home while she went to work, since he was still unemployed. Nobby, however, would have none of that. He had found a proud sense of rebelliousness somewhere, maybe from the nudie club, watching mammal titties bounce all the time.

In any case, Simpson never got over a sneaking suspicion that Nobby had plans of bumping the little goat off, possibly by feeding him to an alligator in Florida.

Most amazing of all, Peter seemed none-the-worse for his excursion to Florida with Sweet the troll. He seemed livelier in class, and he entertained the other third-graders with with the funniest and most convincing magic tricks Simpson had seen in years. He almost couldn't tell how the kid did them sometimes.

Simpson recalled a conversation he had with Peter's mother before leaving Macon.

She told Simpson that Peter was bragging that he would enter the fourth grade with enough magic that Simpson would never give him a zero again. Simpson just laughed and said he would like to have some magic like that himself. As he turned to leave, she asked him if he knew what "pork" was, and he said he had never heard the word.

"It's a troll word," she said, "Peter seems to think he cannot go another day without it, whatever it is."

"Well, what the hell is it?" Nobby had said, entering the room.

"I don't know. I'm not sure that Peter knows either. But I thought you would, Coach Simpson."

"Why would I know? I don't speak troll."

"But you been to college," said Nobby.

"No, that ain't it," she said. "It's because Peter said he was taking you to Florida for `pork.'"

Simpson felt great about his new relationship with the kid, the first he had developed with a student. He meant to ask him what "pork" was, if he ever remembered. He told Turp about it, but she did not seemed one bit impressed. She told Simpson he was in for a surprise. What the hell did she know?