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THE BLACK PHONE



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The Black Phone

by

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1.

The fat man on the other side of the road was about to drop his groceries. He had a paper bag in each arm, and was struggling to jam a key into the back door of his van. Finney sat on the front steps of Poole's Hardware, a bottle of grape soda in one hand, watching it all. The fat man was going to lose his groceries the moment he got the door open. The one in his left arm was already sliding free.

He wasn't any kind of fat, but grotesquely fat. His head had been shaved to a glossy polish, and there were two plump folds of skin where his neck met the base of his skull. He wore a loud Hawaiian shirt – toucans nestled among hanging creepers – although it was too cool for short-sleeves. The wind had a brisk edge, so that Finney was always hunching and turning his face away from it. He wasn't dressed for the weather either. It would've made more sense for him to wait for his father inside, only John Finney didn't like the way old Tremont Poole was always eyeballing him, half-glaring, as if he expected him to

break or shoplift something. Finney only went in for grape soda, which he had to have, it was an addiction.

The lock popped and the rear door of the van sprang open. What happened next was such a perfect bit of slapstick it might have been practiced – and only later did it occur to Finney that probably it had been. The back of the van contained a gathering of balloons, and the moment the door was open, they shoved their way out in a jostling mass... thrusting themselves at the fat man, who reacted as if he had no idea they would be there. He leaped back. The bag under his left arm fell, hit the ground, split open. Oranges rolled crazily this way and that. The fat man wobbled and his sunglasses slipped off his face. He recovered and hopped on his toes, snatching at the balloons, but it was already too late, they were sailing away, out of reach.

The fat man cursed and waved a hand at them in a gesture of angry dismissal. He turned away, squinted at the ground and then sank to his knees. He set his other bag in the back of the van and began to explore the pavement with his hands, feeling for his glasses. He put a hand down on an egg, which splintered beneath his palm. He grimaced, shook his hand in the air. Shiny strings of egg white spattered off it.

By then, Finney was already trotting across the road, left his soda behind on the stoop. "Help mister?"

The fat man peered blearily up at him without seeming to see him. "Did you observe that bullshit?"

Finney glanced down the road. The balloons were thirty feet off the ground by now, following the double line along the middle of the road. They were black... all of them, as black as sealskin.

"Yeah. Yeah, I —" he said, and then his voice trailed off and he frowned, watching the balloons bobbing into the low overcast of the sky. The sight of them disturbed him in some way. No one wanted black balloons; what were they good for, anyway? Festive funerals? He stared, briefly transfixed, thinking of poisoned grapes. He moved his tongue around in his mouth, and noticed for the first time that his beloved grape soda left a disagreeable metallic aftertaste, a taste like he had been chewing an exposed copper wire.

The fat man brought him out of it. "See my glasses?"

Finney lowered himself to one knee, leaned forward to look beneath the van. The fat man's glasses were under the bumper.

"Got 'em," he said, stretching an arm past the fat man's leg to pick them up. "What were the balloons for?"

"I'm a part-time clown," said the fat man. He was reaching into the van, getting something out of the paper bag he had set down there. "Call me Al. Hey, you want to see something funny?"

Finney glanced up, had time to see Al holding a steel can, yellow and black, with pictures of wasps on it. He was shaking it furiously. Finney began to smile, had the wild idea that Al was about to spray him with silly string.

The part-time clown hit him in the face with a blast of white foam. Finney started to turn his head away, but was too slow to avoid getting it in his eyes. He screamed and took some in the mouth, tasted something harsh and chemical. His eyes were coals, cooking in their sockets. His throat burned, in his entire life he had never felt any pain like it, a searing icy-heat. His stomach heaved and the grape soda came back up in a hot, sweet rush.

Al had him by the back of the neck and was pulling him forward, into the van. Finney's eyes were open but all he could see were pulsations of orange and oily brown that flared, dripped, ran into one another and faded. The fat man had a fistful of his hair and another hand between his legs, scooping him up by the crotch. The inside of Al's arm brushed his cheek. Finney turned his head and bit down on a mouthful of wobbling fat, squeezed until he tasted blood.

The fat man wailed and let go and for a moment Finney had his feet on the ground again. He stepped back and put his heel on an orange. His ankle folded. He tottered, almost fell and then the fat man had him by the neck again. He shoved him forward. Finney hit one of the van's rear doors, head-first, with a low bonging sound, and all the strength went out of his legs.

Albert had an arm under his chest, tipped him forward, into a coal chute. Then he let go, and Finney dropped, with a horrifying velocity, into darkness.

2.

A door banged open. His feet and knees were sliding across linoleum. He couldn't see much, was pulled through darkness toward a faint fluttering moth of gray light that was always dancing away from him. Another door went crash and he was dragged down a flight of stairs. His knees clubbed each step on the way down.

Al said, "Fucking arm. I ought to snap your neck right now, what you did to my arm."

Finney thought of resisting. They were distant, abstract thoughts. He heard a bolt turn, and he was pulled through a last door, across cement, and finally to a mattress. Al flipped him onto it. The world did a slow, nauseating roll. Finney sprawled on his back and waited for the feeling of motion sickness to pass.

Al sat down beside him, panting for breath.

"Jesus, I'm covered in blood. Like I killed someone. Look at this arm," he said. Then he laughed, husky, disbelieving laughter. "Not that you can see anything."

Neither of them spoke, and an awful silence settled upon the room. Finney shook continuously, had been shivering steadily, more or less since regaining consciousness.

At last Albert spoke. "I know you're scared of me, but I won't hurt you anymore. What I said about I ought to snap your neck, I was just angry. You did a number on my arm, but I won't hold it against you. I guess it makes us even. You don't need to be scared because nothing bad is going to happen to you here. You got my word, Johnny."

At the mention of his name, Finney went perfectly still, abruptly stopped trembling. It wasn't just that the fat man knew his name. It was the way he said it... his breath a little trill of excitement. Johnny. Finney felt a ticklish sensation crawling across his scalp, and realized Al was playing with his hair.

"You want a soda? Tell you what, I'll bring you a soda and then — wait! Did you hear the phone?" Al's voice suddenly wavering a little. "Did you hear a phone ringing somewhere?"

From an unguessable distance, Finney heard the soft burr of a telephone.

"Oh shit," Al said. He exhaled unsteadily. "That's just the phone in the kitchen. Of course it's just the phone in — okay. I'll go see who it is and get you that soda and come right back and then I'll explain everything."

Finney heard him come up off the mattress with a labored sigh, followed the scuffle of his boots as he moved away. A door thumped shut. A bolt slammed. If the phone upstairs rang again, Finney didn't hear it.

3.

He didn't know what Al was going to say when he came back, but he didn't need to explain anything. Finney already knew all about it.

The first child to disappear had been taken two years ago, just after the last of the winter's snow melted. The hill behind St. Luke's was a lumpy slope of greasy mud, so slippery, kids were going down it on sleds, cracking each other up when they crashed at the bottom. A nine-year-old named Loren ran into the brush on the far side of Mission Road to take a whiz, and never came back. Another boy went missing two months later, on the first of June. The papers named the kidnapper The Galesburg Grabber, a name Finney felt lacked something on Jack the Ripper. He took a third boy on the first of October, when the air was aromatic with the smell of dead leaves crunching underfoot.

That night, John and his older sister Susannah sat at the top of the stairs, and listened to their parents arguing in the kitchen. Their mother wanted to sell the house, move away, and their father said he hated when she got hysterical. Something fell over or was thrown. Their mother said she couldn't stand him anymore, was going crazy living with him. Their father said so don't and turned on the TV.

Eight weeks later, at the very end of November, the Galesburg Grabber took Bruce Yamada.

Finney wasn't friends with Bruce Yamada, had never even had a conversation with him – but he had known him. They had pitched against each other, the summer before Bruce disappeared. Bruce Yamada was maybe the best pitcher the Galesburg Cardinals had ever faced; certainly the hardest thrower. The ball sounded different when he threw it in the catcher's glove, not like it sounded when other kids threw. When Bruce Yamada threw, it was like the sound of someone opening the champagne.

Finney pitched well himself, giving up just a pair of runs, and those only because Jay McGinty dropped a big lazy fly to left that anyone else would've caught. After the game – Galesburg lost five to one – the teams formed into two lines, and started to march past each other, slapping gloves. It was when Bruce and Finney met each other to touch gloves that they spoke to each other for the one and only time in Bruce's life.

"You were dirty," Bruce said.

Finney was flustered with happy surprise, opened his mouth to reply – but all that came out was, "good game," same as he said to everyone. It was a thoughtless, automatic line, repeated twenty straight times, and it was said before he could help himself. Later, though, he wished he had come up with something as cool as you were dirty, something that really smoked.

He didn't run into Bruce again the rest of the summer, and when he did finally happen to see him – coming out of

the movies that fall – they didn't speak, just nodded to each other. A few weeks later, Bruce strolled out of the Space Port arcade, told his friends he was walking home, and never got there. The dragnet turned up one of his sneakers in the gutter on Circus Street. It stunned Finney to think a boy he knew had been stolen away, yanked right out of his shoes, and was never coming back. Was already dead somewhere, with dirt in his face and bugs in his hair and his eyes open and staring at exactly nothing.

But then a year passed, and more, and no other kids disappeared, and Finney turned thirteen, a safe age – the person snatching children had never bothered with anyone older than twelve. People thought the Galesburg Grabber had moved away, or been arrested for some other crime, or died. Maybe Bruce Yamada killed him, Finney thought once, after hearing two adults wonder aloud whatever happened to the Grabber. Maybe Bruce Yamada picked up a rock as he was being kidnapped, and later saw a chance to show the Galesburg Grabber his fastball. There was a hell of an idea.

Only Bruce didn't kill the Grabber, the Grabber had killed him, like he had killed three others, and like he was going to kill Finney. Finney was one of the black balloons now. There was no one to pull him back, no way to turn himself around. He was sailing away from everything he knew, into a future that stretched open before him, as vast and alien as the winter sky.

4.

He risked opening his eyes. The air stung his eyeballs, and it was like looking through a Coke bottle, everything distorted and tinted an unlikely shade of green, although that was an improvement on not being able to see at all. He was on a mattress at one end of a room with white plaster walls. The walls seemed to bend in at the top and bottom, enclosing the world between like a pair of white parentheses. He assumed — hoped — this was only an illusion created by his poisoned eyes.

Finney couldn't see to the far end of the room, couldn't see the door he had been brought in through. He might have been underwater, peering into silty jade depths, a diver in the cabin room of a sunken cruise liner. To his left was a toilet with no seat. To his right, midway down the room, was a black box or cabinet bolted to the wall. At first he couldn't recognize it for what it was, not because of his unclear vision, but because it was so out of place, a thing that didn't belong in a prison cell.

A phone. A large, old-fashioned, black phone, the receiver hanging from a silver cradle on the side.

Al wouldn't have left him in a room with a working phone. If it worked, one of the other boys would've used it. Finney knew that, but he felt a thrill of hope anyway, so intense it almost brought tears to his eyes. Maybe he had recovered faster than the other boys. Maybe the others

were still blind from the wasp poison when Al killed them, never even knew about the phone. He grimaced, appalled by the force of his own longing. But then he started crawling toward it, plunged off the edge of the mattress and fell to the floor, three stories below. His chin hit the cement. A black flash bulb blinked in the front of his brain, just behind his eyes.

He pushed himself up on all fours, shaking his head slowly from side to side, insensible for a moment, then recovering himself. He started to crawl. He crossed a great deal of floor without seeming to get any closer to the phone. It was as if he were on a conveyor belt, bearing him steadily back, even as he plodded forward on hands and knees. Sometimes when he squinted at the phone, it seemed to be breathing, the sides swelling and then bending inward. Once, Finney had to stop to rest his hot forehead against the icy concrete. It was the only way to make the room stop moving.

When he next looked up, he found the phone directly above him. He pulled himself to his feet, grabbing the phone as soon as it was in reach and using it to hoist himself up. It was not quite an antique, but certainly old, with a pair of round silver bells on top and a clapper between them, a dial instead of buttons. Finney found the receiver and held it to his ear, listened for dial tone. Nothing. He pushed the silver cradle down, let it spring back up. The black phone remained silent. He dialed for the

operator. The receiver went click-click-click in his ear, but there was no ring on the other end, no connection.

"It doesn't work," Al said. "It hasn't worked since I was a kid."

Finney swayed on his heels, then steadied himself. He for some reason didn't want to turn his head and make eye contact with his captor, and he allowed himself only a sideways glance at him. The door was close enough to see now, and Al stood in it.

"Hang up," he said, but Finney stood as he was, the receiver in one hand. After a moment, Al went on, "I know you're scared and you want to go home. I'm going to take you home soon. I just - everything's all fucked up and I have to be upstairs for a while. Something's come up."

"What?"

"Never mind what."

Another helpless, awful surge of hope. Poole maybe - old Mr. Poole had seen Albert shoving him into the van and called the police. "Did someone see something? Are the police coming? If you let me go, I won't tell, I won't - "

"No," the fat man said, and laughed, harshly and unhappily. "Not the police."

"Someone though? Someone's coming?"

The kidnapper stiffened, and the close-set eyes in his wide, homely face were stricken and wondering. He didn't reply, but he didn't need to. The answer Finney wanted was

there in his look, his body language. Either someone was on the way – or already there, upstairs somewhere.

"I'll scream," Finney said. "If there's someone upstairs, they'll hear me."

"No he won't. Not with the door shut."

"He?"

Al's face darkened, the blood rushing to his cheeks. Finney watched his hands squeeze into fists, then open slowly again.

"When the door's shut you can't hear anything down here," Al went on, in a tone of forced calm. "I soundproofed it myself. So shout if you want, you won't bother anyone."

"You're the one who killed those other kids."

"No. Not me. That was someone else. I'm not going to make you do anything you won't like."

Something about the construction of this phrase – I'm not going to make you do anything you won't like – brought a fever heat to Finney's face and left his body cold, roughened with gooseflesh.

"If you try to touch me I'll scratch your face and whoever is coming to see you will ask why."

Albert gazed at him blankly for a moment, absorbing this, then said, "You can hang up the phone now."

Finney set the receiver back in the cradle.

"I was in here and it rang once," Al said. "Creepiest thing. I think static electricity does it. It went off once

when I was standing right beside it, and I picked it up, without thinking, you know, to see if anyone was there."

Finney didn't want to make conversation with someone who meant to kill him at the first convenient opportunity, and was taken by surprise when he opened his mouth and heard himself asking a question. "Was there?"

"No. Didn't I say it doesn't work?"

The door opened and shut. In the instant it was ajar, the great, ungainly fat man slipped himself out, bouncing on his toes – a hippo performing ballet – and was gone before Finney could open his mouth to yell.

5.

He screamed anyway. Screamed and threw himself at the door, crashing his whole body against it, not imagining it could be knocked open, but thinking if there was someone upstairs they might hear it banging in the frame. He didn't shout until his throat was raw, though; a few times was enough to satisfy him that no one was going to hear.

Finney quit hollering to peer around his underwater compartment, trying to figure where the light was coming from. There were two little windows – long glass slots – set high in the wall, well out of easy reach, emitting some faint, weed green light. Rusty grills had been bolted across them.

Finney studied one of the windows for a long time, then ran at the wall, didn't give himself time to think how

drained and sick he was, planted a foot against the plaster and leaped. For one moment he grabbed the grill, but the steel links were too close together to squeeze a finger in, and he dropped back to his heels, then fell on his rear, shivering violently. Still. He had been up there long enough to get a glimpse through the filth-obscured glass. It was a double window, ground-level, almost completely hidden behind strangling brush. If he could break it, someone might hear him shouting.

They all thought of that, he thought. And you see how far it got them.

He went around the room again, and found himself standing before the phone once more. Studying it. His gaze tracked a slender black wire, stapled to the plaster above it. It climbed the wall for about a foot, then ended in a spray of frayed copper filaments. Finney discovered he was holding the receiver again, had picked it up without knowing he was doing it, was even holding it to his ear... an unconscious act of such hopeless, awful want, it made him shrink into himself a little. Why would anyone put a phone in their basement? But then there was the toilet, too. Maybe, probably – awful thought – someone had once lived in this room.

Then he was on the mattress, staring through the jade murk at the ceiling. He noted, for the first time, that he hadn't cried, and didn't feel like he was going to. He was very intentionally resting, building up his energy for the

next round of exploration and thought. Would be circling the room, looking for an advantage, something he could use, until Al came back. Finney could hurt him if he had anything, anything at all, to use as a weapon. A piece of broken glass, a rusted spring. Were there springs in the mattress? When he had the energy to move again he'd try and figure out.

By now his parents had to know something had happened to him. They had to be frantic. But when he tried to picture the search, he didn't visualize his weeping mother answering a detective's questions in her kitchen, and he didn't see his father, out in front of Poole's Hardware, turning away from the sight of a policeman carrying an empty bottle of grape soda in an evidence bag.

Instead, he imagined Susannah, standing on the pedals of her ten-speed and gliding down the center of one wide residential avenue after another, the collar of her denim jacket turned up, grimacing into the icy sheer of the wind. Susannah was three years older than Finney, but they had both been born on the same day, June 21st, a fact she held to be of mystical importance. Susannah had a lot of occultish ideas, owned a deck of Tarot cards, read books about the connection between Stonehenge and aliens. When they were younger, Susannah had a toy stethoscope, which she would press to his head, in an attempt to listen in on his thoughts. He had once drawn five cards out of a deck at random and she had guessed all of them, one after another,

holding the end of the stethoscope to the center of his forehead — five of spades, six of clubs, ten and jack of diamonds, ace of hearts — but she had never been able to repeat the trick.

Finney saw his older sister searching for him down streets that were, in his imagination, free of pedestrians or traffic. The wind was in the trees, flinging the bare branches back and forth so they appeared to rake futilely at the low sky. Sometimes Susannah half-closed her eyes, as if to better concentrate on some distant sound calling to her. She was listening for him, for his unspoken cry, hoping to be guided to him by some trick of telepathy.

She made a left, then a right, moving automatically, and discovered a street she had never seen before, a dead end road. On either side of it were disused looking ranches with unraked front lawns, children's toys left out in driveways. At the sight of this street, her blood quickened. She felt strongly that Finney's kidnapper lived somewhere on this road. She biked more slowly, turning her head from side to side, making an uneasy inspection of each house as she went by. The whole road seemed set in a state of improbable silence, as if every person on it had been evacuated weeks ago, taking their pets with them, locking all the doors, turning out all the lights. Not this one, she thought. Not that one. And on and on, to the dead-end of the street, and the last of the houses.

She put a foot down, stood in place with her bike under her. She hadn't felt hopeless yet, but standing there, chewing her lip and looking around, the thought began to form that she wasn't going to find her brother, that no one was going to find him. It was an awful street, and the wind was cold. She imagined she could feel that cold inside her, a ticklish chill behind the breastbone.

In the next moment she heard a sound, a tinny twanging, which echoed strangely. She glanced around, trying to place it, lifted her gaze to the last telephone pole on the street. A mass of black balloons were caught there, snarled in the lines. The wind was wrestling to wrench them free, and they bobbed and weaved, pulling hard to escape. The wires held the balloons implacably where they were. She recoiled at the sight of them. They were dreadful — somehow they were dreadful — a dead spot in the sky. The wind plucked at the wires, and made them ring.

When the phone rang Finney opened his eyes. The vivid little story he had been telling himself about Susannah fled away. Only a story, not a vision; a ghost story, and he was the ghost, or would be soon. He lifted his head from the mattress, startled to find it almost dark... and his gaze fell upon the black phone. It seemed to him that the air was still faintly vibrating, from the brash firehouse clang of the steel clapper on the rusty bells.

He pushed himself up. He knew the phone couldn't really ring — that hearing it had just been a trick of his

sleeping mind — yet he half-expected it to ring again. It had been stupid to lay there, dreaming the daylight away. He needed an advantage, a bent nail, a stone to throw. In a short time it would be dark, and he couldn't search the room if he couldn't see. He stood. He felt spacey, empty-headed and cold, it was cold in the basement. He walked to the phone, put the receiver to his ear.

"Hello?" he asked.

He heard the wind sing, outside the windows. He listened to the dead line. As he was about to hang up, he thought he heard a click on the other end.

"Hello?" he asked.

6.

When the darkness gathered itself up and fell upon him, he curled himself on the mattress, with his knees close to his chest. He didn't sleep. He hardly blinked. He waited for the door to open and the fat man to come in and shut it behind him, for the two of them to be alone in the dark together, but Al didn't come. Finney was empty of thought, all his concentration bent to the dry rap of his pulse, and the distant rush of the wind beyond the high windows. He was not afraid. What he felt was something larger than fear, a narcotic terror that numbed him completely, made it impossible to imagine moving.

He did not sleep, he was not awake. Minutes did not pass, collecting into hours. There was no point in thinking

about time in the old way. There was only one moment and then another moment, in a string of moments that went on in a quiet, deadly procession. He was roused from his dreamless paralysis only when one of the windows began to show, a rectangle of watery gray floating high in the darkness. He knew, without knowing at first how he could know, that he wasn't meant to live to see the window painted with dawn. The thought didn't inspire hope exactly, but it did inspire movement and with great effort he sat up.

His eyes were better. When he stared at the glowing window, he saw twinkling, prismatic lights at the edge of his vision... but he was seeing the window clearly, nonetheless. His stomach cramped from emptiness.

Finney forced himself to stand and began to patrol the room again, looking for his advantage. In a back corner of the room, he found a place where a patch of cement floor had crumbled into granular, popcorn-sized chunks, with a layer of sandy earth beneath. He was putting a handful of carefully selected nuggets into his pocket when he heard the thump of the bolt turning.

The fat man stood in the doorway. They regarded each other across a distance of five yards. Al wore striped boxers and a white undershirt, stained down the front with old sweat. His fat legs were shocking in their paleness.

"I want breakfast," Finney said. "I'm hungry."

"How's your eyes?"

Finney didn't reply.

"What are you doing over there?"

Finney squatted in the corner, glaring.

Al said, "I can't bring you anything to eat. You'll have to wait."

"Why? Is there someone upstairs who would see you taking me food?"

Again, his face darkened, his hands squeezed into fists. When he replied, however, his tone was not angry, but glum and defeated. "Never mind." Finney took that to mean yes.

"If you aren't going to feed me why did you even come down here?" Finney asked him.

Al shook his head, staring at Finney with a kind of morose resentment, as if this was another unfair question he couldn't possibly be expected to answer. But then he shrugged and said, "Just to look at you. I just wanted to look at you." Finney's upper lip drew back from his teeth in an unreasoned expression of disgust, and Albert visibly wilted. "I'll go."

When he opened the door, Finney sprang to his feet and began to scream help. Al stumbled over the door jamb in his haste to back out and almost fell, then slammed the door.

Finney stood in the center of the room, sides heaving for breath. He had never really imagined he could get past Albert and out the door — it was too far away — had only wanted to test his reaction time. Fatty was even slower

than he thought. He was slow, and there was someone else in the house, someone upstairs. Almost against his will, Finney felt a building sense of charge, a nervous excitement that was almost like hope.

For the rest of the day, and all that night, Finney was alone.

7.

When the cramps came again, late on his third day in the basement, he had to sit down on the striped mattress to wait for them to pass. It was like someone had thrust a spit through his side, and was turning it slowly. He ground his back teeth until he tasted blood.

Later, Finney drank out of the tank on the back of the toilet, and then stayed there, on his knees, to investigate the bolts and the pipes. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of the toilet before. He worked until his hands were raw and abraded, trying to unscrew a thick iron nut, three inches in diameter, but it was caked with rust, and he couldn't budge it.

He lurched awake, the light coming through the window on the west side of the room, falling in a beam of bright yellow sunshine filled with scintillating mica-flecks of dust. It alarmed him that he couldn't remember lying down on the mattress to nap. It was hard to piece thoughts together, to reason things through. Even after he had been

awake for ten minutes, he felt as if he had only just come awake, empty-headed and disorientated.

For a long time he was unable to rise, and sat with his arms wound around his chest, while the last of the light fled, and the shadows rose around him. Sometimes a fit of shivering would come over him, so fierce his teeth chattered. As cold as it was, it would be worse after dark. He didn't think he could wait out another night as cold as the last one. That was Al's plan maybe. To starve and freeze the fight out of him. Or maybe there was no plan, maybe the fat man had keeled over of a heart attack, and this was just how Finney was going to die, one cold minute at a time. The phone was breathing again. Finney stared at it, watching as the sides inflated, withdrew, and inflated again.

"Stop that," he said to it.

It stopped.

He walked. He had to, to stay warm. The moon rose, and for a while it lit the black phone like a bone-colored spotlight. Finney's face burned and his breath smoked, as if he were more demon than boy.

He couldn't feel his feet. They were too cold. He stomped around, trying to bring the life back into them. He flexed his hands. His fingers were cold too, stiff and painful to move. He heard off-key singing and realized it was him. Time and thought were coming in leaps and pulses. He fell over something on the floor, then went back,

feeling around with both hands, trying to figure out what had tripped him up, if it was something he could use as a weapon. He couldn't find anything and finally had to admit to himself he had tripped over his own feet. He put his head on the cement and shut his eyes.

He woke to the sound of the phone ringing again. He sat up, and looked across the room at it. The eastern-facing window was a pale, silvery shade of blue. He was trying to decide if it had really rung, or if he had only dreamed it ringing, when it rang once more, a loud, metallic clashing.

Finney rose, then waited for the floor to stop heaving underfoot; it was like standing on a waterbed. The phone rang a third time, the clapper clashing at the bells. The abrasive reality of the sound had the effect of sweeping his head clear, returning him to himself.

He picked up the receiver and put his ear to it.

"Hello?" he asked.

He heard the snowy hiss of static.

"John," said the boy on the other end. The connection was so poor, the call might have been coming from the other side of the world. "Listen John. It's going to be today."

"Who is this?"

"I don't remember my name," the boy said. "It's the first thing you lose."

"First thing you lose when?"

"You know when."

But Finney thought he recognized the voice, even though they had only spoken to each other that one time.

"Bruce? Bruce Yamada?"

"Who knows," the boy said. "Tell me if it matters."

Finney lifted his eyes to the black wire traveling up the wall, stared at the spot where it ended in a spray of copper needles. He decided it didn't matter.

"What's going to be today?" Finney asked.

"I was calling to say he left you a way to fight him."

"What way?"

"You're holding it."

Finney turned his head, looked at the receiver in his hand. From the earpiece, which was no longer against his ear, he heard the faraway hiss of static and the tinny sound of the dead boy saying something else.

"What?" Finney asked, putting the receiver to his ear once more.

"Sand," Bruce Yamada told him. "Make it heavier. It isn't heavy enough. Do you understand?"

"Did the phone ring for any of the other kids?"

"Ask not for whom the phone rings," Bruce said, and there came soft, childish laughter. Then he said, "None of us heard it. It rang, but none of us heard. Just you. A person has to stay here a while, before you learn how to hear it. You're the only one to last this long. He killed the other children before they recovered, but he can't kill you, can't even come downstairs. His brother sits up all

night in the living room making phone calls. His brother is a coke-head who never sleeps. Albert hates it but he can't make him leave."

"Bruce? Are you really there or am I losing my mind?"

"Albert hears the phone too," Bruce replied, continuing as if Finney had said nothing. "Sometimes when he's down in the basement we prank call him."

"I feel weak all the time and I don't know if I can fight him the way I feel."

"You will. You'll be dirty. I'm glad it's you. You know, she really found the balloons, John. Susannah did."

"She did?"

"Ask her when you get home."

There was a click. Finney waited for a dial tone, but there was none.

8.

A wheat-colored light had begun to puddle into the room when Finney heard the familiar slam of the bolt. His back was to the door, he was kneeling in the corner of the room, at the place where the cement had been shattered to show the sandy earth beneath. Finney still had the bitter taste of old copper in his mouth, a flavor like the bad aftertaste of grape soda. He turned his head but didn't rise, shielding what was in his hands with his body.

He was so startled to see someone besides Albert, he cried out, sprang unsteadily to his feet. The man in the

doorway was small, and although his face was round and plump, the rest of his body was too tiny for his clothes: a rumpled army jacket, a loose, cable-knit sweater. His unkempt hair was retreating from the egg-shaped curve of his forehead. One corner of his mouth turned up in a wry, disbelieving smile.

"Holy shit," said Albert's brother. "I knew he had something he didn't want me to see in the basement but I mean holy shit."

Finney staggered toward him, and words came spilling out in an incoherent, desperate jumble, like people who have been stuck for a night in an elevator, finally set free. "Please - my mom - help - call help - call my sister - "

"Don't worry. He's gone. He had to run into work," said the brother. "Now I know why he was freaking out about getting called in. He was worried I'd find you while he's out."

Albert stepped into the light behind him with a hatchet, and lifted it up, cocked it like a baseball bat over one shoulder. Albert's brother went on, "Hey, do you want to know the story how I found you?"

"No," Finney said. "No, no, no."

Albert's brother made a face. "Sure. Whatever. I'll tell you some other time. Christ, calm down. Everything's okay now."

Albert brought the hatchet down into the back of his younger brother's skull with a hard, wet clunk. The force of the impact threw blood into Al's face. The brother toppled forward. The ax stayed in his head, and Albert's hands stayed on the handle. As the brother fell, he pulled Al over with him.

Albert hit the basement floor on his knees, drew a sharp breath through clenched teeth. The ax-handle slipped out of his hands and his brother fell onto his face with a heavy boneless thump. Albert grimaced, then let out a strangled cry, staring at his brother with the ax in him.

Finney stood a yard away, breathing shallowly, holding the receiver to his chest in one hand. In the other hand was a coil of black wire, the wire that had connected the receiver to the black phone. It had been necessary to chew through it to pull it off. The wire itself was straight, not curly, like on a modern phone. He had the line wrapped three times around his right hand.

"You see this," Albert said, his voice choked, uneven. He looked up. "You see what you made me do?" Then he saw what Finney was holding, and his brow knotted with confusion. "What the fuck you do to the phone?"

Finney stepped toward him and snapped the receiver into his face, across Al's nose. He had unscrewed the mouthpiece and filled the mostly hollow receiver with sand, and screwed the mouthpiece back in to hold it all in place. It hit Albert's nose with a brittle snap like plastic

breaking, only it wasn't plastic breaking. The fat man made a sound, a choked cry, and blood blurted from his nostrils. He lifted a hand. Finney smashed the receiver down and crushed his fingers.

Albert dropped his shattered hand and looked up, an animal sound rising in his throat. Finney hit him again to shut him up, clubbed the receiver against the bare curve of his skull. It hit with a satisfying knocking sound and a spray of glittering sand leaped into the sunlight. Screaming, the fat man propelled himself off the floor, staggering forward, but Finney skipped back — so much faster than Albert — striking him across the mouth, hard enough to turn his head halfway around, then in the knee to drop him, to make him stop.

Al fell, throwing his arms out, caught Finney at the waist and slammed him to the floor. He came down on top of Finney's legs. Finney struggled to pull himself out from under. The fat man lifted his head, blood drizzling from his mouth, a furious moan rising from somewhere deep in his chest. Finney still held the receiver in one hand, and three loops of black wire in the other. He sat up, meant to club Albert with the receiver again, but then his hands did something else instead. He put the wire around the fat man's throat, and pulled tight, crossing his wrists behind Al's neck. Albert got a hand on his face and scratched him, flaying Finney's right cheek. Finney pulled the wire a notch tighter and Al's tongue popped out of his mouth.

Across the room, the black phone rang. The fat man choked. He stopped scratching at Finney's face and set his fingers under the wire around his throat. He could only use his left hand, because the fingers of his right were shattered, bent in unlikely directions. The phone rang again. The fat man's gaze flicked toward it, then back to Finney's face. Albert's pupils were very wide, so wide the golden ring of his irises had shrunk to almost nothing. His pupils were a pair of black balloons, obscuring twin suns. The phone rang and rang. Finney pulled at the wire. On Albert's dark, bruise colored face, was a horrified question.

"It's for you," Finney told him.