The Bug

An aggressive virus or infection was making the rounds at work that week, its rheumy-eyed victims wheezing and sneezing, spraying one another with the watery detritus of respiration, lobbing the bug back and forth like a soggy medicine ball.

The company executives were immune to the bug's effects, insulated as they were by hermetic elevator access to the floor which they occupied. Everyone else got it, though. First to go were the secretaries, who were most frequently talked to and hence rained upon by everyone else; then the housekeeping staff, who picked it up on their hands and fingers while ministering to the restroom fixtures; finally the middle managers, who rarely ventured forth from their offices except to meet with one another, by which time the bug — with no one left to attack out in the open — had moved to the conference rooms, waiting for fresh meat to come to *it*.

Webster picked up the disease sometime on Tuesday; in retrospect, he thought it might have come from a communal coffee mug he'd found on the counter between the office's Mr. Coffee machine and the now-empty institutional-size carton of Kleenex. Distracted by the eerie unwonted silence of the coffee room, he'd neglected to wash the mug out more than twice before using it. Normally he was a fanatic about that, even at home — let alone at work, where God only knew who might have used it last and for what purpose.

Later, by the end of the day, his handkerchief was soggy and limp, his nose incandescent, his hands trembling like newborn puppies. But the bug had first declared its presence at around lunchtime in the form of a dull throbbing ache to either side of his nose, inside his sinuses; it felt as though his face were bulging upwards, and his cheeks stretching to merge with his eye sockets. That's what he told Dr. Morse when he stopped at his office on the way home from work.

"Mm-*hmm*," said Dr. Morse, neutral as usual, echoing Webster's words as though they'd really registered. "Merge, you say? With the sockets?" He put the mirrored disk of his stethoscope on Webster's chest and said, "Cough," which Webster did. Then he removed the stethoscope from his ears and sat back in the dainty typist's chair from which he conducted all examinations, his hands in his lap. Held loosely in one hand, the stethoscope's vermillion rubber tubes writhed spasmodically, like an earthworm run over by a bicycle tire, and Webster's gut churned in sympathy.

Dr. Morse regarded Webster solemnly for a moment. The news, Webster was certain, was not good. Then what? He lived alone — who would take care of him during his decline? Who would pay his bills, fix his meals, change his bedclothes, wash his underwear, and at the last summon 911 to apply those huge electroshock suction cups, futilely, to his chest...?

Suddenly Dr. Morse was seized by a sneezing spell whose onset so startled him that he jumped to his feet; he sneezed three times (weird yelping sneezes they were, "Arp! Arp! Arp!" like the neurotic vocalizations of a toy dog) — not into the handkerchief which he had yanked from a pocket, but into the hand holding the stethoscope. Wheezing and sniffing, he mopped at himself with the handkerchief. "Sorry," he said, "excuse me. What I was going to say was, it's just something going around, nothing to worry about." He recommended that Webster stay home from work for a few days, get bed rest. And fluids, lots of fluids. Flush those poisons out, he said, arpped again, and patted Webster on the shoulder.

Webster was not used to being sick, nor was he used to staying at home, indoors, for days at a time. He'd need to prepare for this, he thought as he walked to his car from Dr. Morse's office. Fluids, also food. Maybe soup and Saltines? His mother had always fed him soup and Saltines and something called "flat Coke" when he was sick. Unfailingly, the monotonous grue of the regimen had sent him, heaving, to the toilet. Flush those poisons out.

He stopped for his sick-food at the only convenience store in town, a 7-11 owned and operated by a Native American couple.

Webster's only information about the Indians came from his neighbor, Mrs. Wilkerson. The Local Enquirer. "*The 7-11!*" she'd yelled to him across the road once, months ago, when they'd walked out to check their mailboxes at the same time. She paused while a tractor trailer roared past. "*Did you hear? Indians! I don't know what tribe but they're Indians all right! Yes! Indians! From Oklahoma!*"

Mrs. Wilkerson's willingness to share such data was generally in inverse proportion to its truth. But from then on Webster spent as little time as possible in the store. He worried the Native Americans might fancy, in his neurotic sidelong glances and slumping shoulders, the guilty DNA of a Little Big Horn survivor's descendant.

From a little wire rack alongside the Slurpee dispenser, the couple sold decorative swatches of cowhide hand-tooled with an assortment of primitive objects and mystical geometric designs. Pyramids, antelope from which protruded the shafts of stylized arrows and spears, radiant eyeballs. "EVERY ONE UNQIUE!!!" said a cheap masking-tape label on the rack, through which showed the words TV GUIDE.

"Don't let that hand-tooling fool you," Mrs. Wilkerson had confided to him on another occasion, after running across the road and collaring him on the front lawn before he'd been able to escape into his house. "It looks very exotic but why, you could do it yourself." Her eyebrows twitched. "They used a plain old *soldering iron*! Bought it at a Sears in Tulsa. A soldering iron, you believe that?"

At home, Webster put the Caffeine-Free diet Coke in the refrigerator and (while water for the Cup-a-Soup was heating) changed into pajamas, bathrobe, and slippers. He rummaged through the steamer trunk in which he stored seldom-used linens, extracting from it the red-white-and-green afghan he'd bought at a neighboring church's annual Christmas bazaar, years ago. Musty it was, fragrant with the perfume of neglect, but it would do. He draped it over himself as he sat with his feet up on the coffee table, mug of instant soup and plate of Saltines and glass of soda on the end table beside him. He picked up the television remote-control, ate a cracker, and scanned the TV program listing in the newspaper.

Nothing in the complex grid seemed the least bit interesting, and he tossed it aside. Maybe his eyes, burning with fever, would latch onto something visual which had not appealed to his brain when presented in the dull black-and-white of the newspaper schedule. He blew his nose into the paper towel he was using as a napkin, scattering crumbs. Then he took a sip of soup and a sip of soda, and turned the TV on.

Although he had subscribed to cable television for years now, Webster scarcely ever watched it. Even so, he had observed long ago that many of the channels carried on cable were not itemized in the program listing — evidently because they showed the same thing, more or less, every minute of every day.

Here was a channel, for example, which broadcast nothing but an interminable succession of local real-estate advertisements, the washed-out Polaroid photographs of split levels, condos, and ugly vacant lots accompanied not by voiceover sales pitches but by muted Latin dance tunes, cha-cha and rhumba, sometimes a tango for variety. How desperate could local realtors be? He ate a cracker, clicked the remote's channel-up button, took a swallow of soup.

A channel of twenty-four-hour music videos was next. Unlike the real estate channel, he was sure, this one got lots of viewers, all day and all night; but Webster himself had never been able to identify — let alone identify *with* — any of the messages presumably being communicated by the dancers' writhing hormones, the announcers' deadpan irony, the vocalists' dreamy soft-focus closeups as they brooded about Satanism, body-piercing, sex with one another and animals, and all the reasons the pains and terrors of youth lacerated the soul more savagely than those of adulthood. He swallowed some soup and ate another cracker, leaving its crumbs in his mouth as he drank an ounce of diet Coke and swished it around, and again pressed channel-up.

An all-day weather channel was next, followed by all-news-all-the-time. Situation comedy re-runs, police-drama re-runs, home shopping networks, preachers of sundry creeds and credibilities, twenty-four-hour sports, twenty-four-hour comedy, and twenty-four-hour cartoons, legislative sessions, and Spanish-language celebrity news. At last, his mug of soup and glass of Coke empty, his head clogged and threatening eruption, he settled on a channel specializing in broadcasts of old and foreign movies, swung his feet up on the sofa, and pulled the Christmas afghan up to his chin.

This movie was both old and foreign, a strange black-and-white romantic musical comedy made somewhere in Europe in the early 1930s, its stars' lips inexpertly dubbed into English in British accents of unlikely breeding and tone. Not until the movie was nearly over did he realize he had seen it before. The guy, oh yeah, right: he got the girl and the two of them jazz-danced away down a winding cobblestoned Autobahn eerily empty of traffic, vanishing into the orb of the setting sun and their presumably blissful future. Unforgettable, now that he remembered it.

He blinked groggily, looked at his watch. Nearly eleven o'clock. Plenty of bed rest, Morse had said. Webster sat up and pointed the remote control at the television, meaning to shut it off but pressing by mistake the channel-up button.

"—in Idaho this week," a gray-suited announcer was saying as he aimed his own remote-control at a map of the United States and zoomed in on the eastern portion of that state, the plaster cast into which Montana was pressing its craggy western face.

The rectangle in which the map was set was bordered by a thick frame of solid black. In the top of this frame, lettered in a dull caterpillar-green, was the phrase NORMALIZED MORTALITY RATE. The announcer's hand passed in circles over Idaho Falls and Pocatello as though blessing them. They evidently needed some kind of sacrament: laying siege to both cities, all the way out to their farthest suburbs, were a pair of ashen ovals, at each of their centers a smaller charcoal-gray blob. Twin cigarette burns in the map's flesh. Checking the grays against the black-to-white scale conveniently provided below the title, Webster saw that these sections of Idaho were currently experiencing a Normalized Mortality Rate — whatever that was — in the range of forty to sixty percent.

The announcer, smiling back over his shoulder at the camera, waving his hands over the map, was now explaining something about "the correlation between the urban violent-crime rate

and the overall normalized mortality rate." Webster wasn't really listening, though; he was trying to figure out just what it was he had stumbled onto.

He pressed the remote's recall button, which informed him that it was now 11:06 pm and that he was tuned to channel 71. The television schedule did not identify a channel 71 at all, which meant that this — whatever it was — went on all day. But what *was* it?

No sooner had he asked himself that question than the announcer answered it for him. Still smiling, he put his remote-control into a side pocket of his suit jacket and patted the pocket flap down over it. "In a few minutes we'll take a look at the national morbidity picture here on The Dead Channel. But first, these messages." His image and that of Idaho's Normalized Mortality Rate dissolved, replaced by a station-identification panel — bordered in black, with a drawing of what must be lilies in the lower right corner — which confirmed (in an elegant shadowed script which created the effect of having been embossed upon Webster's screen) that this was, indeed, The Dead Channel.

Ads, even: one which limned in lyrical but non-specific terms the mission and philosophy of something called The National Society of Bereavement Professionals; one which detailed the "grace and sophistication" of a line of sympathy cards and thank-you-for-your-sympathy stationery manufactured by a subsidiary of a huge multi-national company not generally noted for its depth of human feeling; and finally one for the DeForrest Memorial Works, right up the road from Webster's house. They were featuring a two-for-one sale: "Purchase one of our 'Asphodel' series headstones and the second is yours with our compliments! One purchase per household *please*."

After the commercials, as the smiling announcer had promised, a different national map appeared, depicting the MORBIDITY INDEX. A different announcer, too, this one not as slick as his predecessor; he was wearing not a suit but a camel-colored sportcoat and dark green slacks. The sportcoat was not buttoned, and from its open portal protruded a stout belly. This announcer had thinning gray hair and a bristly gray mustache, and he seemed not particularly comfortable on-camera — as though he were only doing this to bring in some extra bucks, then he'd quit and go back to full-time VCR and toaster-oven repair. A title which flashed on the screen for a few seconds identified him as Jack Llongo.

"Okay," said Llongo, "look, here's the morbidity thing." He winced, perhaps receiving some kind of off-camera prompting, and corrected himself, "Index, right, the morbidity *index* I mean."

The Dead Channel, Webster was still thinking. Maybe the undertakers' association, the bereavement counselors or whatever they were called, maybe they'd set up this Dead-Channel thing to get around the aesthetic and cultural obstacles to selling their services the way other industries did...

Jack Llongo was groping his way through the Morbidity Index's complexities. The map was drawn and re-drawn like one of those time-lapse computer-enhanced satellite radar views of storm fronts, with luminous green and yellow waves of disease washing over the nation from left to right. Llongo rapped the Great Lakes with the knuckle of his right index finger. "Chicago, see, and Detroit. Here's Cleveland. All the way over here to Buffalo, which is... here, no *here*. That old morbidity index is climbing, flu and colds, those diseases are really *coming at you*, heh heh, tough suckers—" He winced again. "Anyhow, let's check out one of the biggest trouble spots right now."

And when Llongo pointed at the map with his remote-control, it zoomed in, thrillingly,

on Webster's own little corner of the universe:

There was The City, laved and re-laved by green and yellow foam as the map cycled through again and again. In the corner of the map was Webster's own little suburb, a pinpoint which changed from beige to yellow to green like a mood ring sensing Webster's return home. "Up here," Llongo was saying, "like the map shows, up here you're getting clobbered. My advice to you folks is stay indoors, get bed rest, drink plenty of fluids, and heh heh, yeah, watch where you sneeze and keep your hands off the doorknobs—"

Llongo and his Morbidity Index map disappeared, abruptly replaced by a solid green screen with black-lettered data; a piano sonata provided the soundtrack. REGIONAL CONDITIONS, said the title: mortality totals; mortality subtotals by age group; causes of death today, month-to-date totals, percentage of various causes of death compared to a year ago today. DISPOSITION OF THE DECEASED, one set of statistics was labeled, a table illustrating raw numbers and percentages of in-ground interments, mausoleum interments, cremations, burials at sea (currently zero), and "Other."

Webster returned from the kitchen with fresh soup and soda. Now The Dead Channel was plugging its own schedule: medical programs, gavel-to-gavel coverage of a Senate probe into "the bereavement industry," and a weekly "Dead Channel FilmFest" (which this Saturday would feature "that uproarious slapstick comedy of bereavement, 'The Loved One'").

Webster looked at his watch again. Now almost 11:30; too late to call anybody, he dearly wanted to discuss this thing, this "dead channel"—

"... and coming up at 11:30 on The Dead Channel," said a woman's voice, "it's the popular 'The Dead Channel Live.'" A talk and call-in show of some kind, hosted by someone named Rita de Jesus; tonight's featured guest was a popular psychologist and advice columnist, a woman who would with Rita de Jesus's help explore "first death," whatever *that* meant.

Webster blew his nose in the paper towel, swallowed the last of his soup and reached for the final cracker. What was wrong with him? What was he doing watching this stuff? He was again about to turn the TV off to go to bed, when "The Dead Channel Live's" subdued theme music and title came up over the image of Rita de Jesus and her guest, sipping coffee or tea and chatting in silence on a set which reminded Webster of the ill-lit parlor of a Victorian bed-and-breakfast in which he had once spent a night of claustrophobia: dark, heavy curtains; stained-glass lamps; coarse upholstery and carpeting; and on every surface, no matter how frequently dusted and polished, a filmy patina of antiquity and gloom.

Throughout Rita de Jesus's opening remarks on the evening's topic — which was "how people cope with their first exposure to death" — she was smiling, not ironically exactly, with no suggestion at all that she was, well, *amused*. It was rather a faint suggestion of a smile, a *mortician's smile*, a smile which murmured to you that yes yes it understood, a smile which took you by the elbow and led you to a chair where you could grieve in private. Webster was so fascinated by Rita de Jesus's mouth that for a moment he lost track of what she was saying.

And her dress...! It was a loose-fitting thing, emerald green, with an outsized neckline which drooped a bit, the dim shadows on her collarbone hinting at the presence of her breasts, and Webster felt a remote stirring inside his pajama bottoms which he had not felt in the many months since the cataclysmic affair which had polished off his marriage. His ex-wife had had a dress like that. Not that cut, but the same color. Or no, wait, it had been his ex-girlfriend's dress, hadn't it? Er, no— well, *one* of them had owned such a dress, anyhow. And seeing this one now, draped on Rita de Jesus's slender frame, rustling against her shoulders when she leaned forward

to pick up her cup, slipping around her knees when she sat back in the overstuffed sofa, well, it was making him a little nuts...

Jesus, he thought, sneezing, laughing, and shaking his head to clear it. With effort, he focused again on what Rita de Jesus and the psychologist were saying.

They were soliciting phone-ins for tonight's show; a 900-number flashed at the bottom of the screen. Each call, said the fine print, would cost $1.75 per minute. "What we want," said Rita de Jesus, tugging a little at the back of her dress's collar so it hiked up but then slid immediately back down again, "are calls from any of you who have ever come face-to-face with death, and are willing to talk about that experience. No stories about funerals or wakes, please. We'd like to hear from viewers who were actually present either when the deceased passed away, or shortly thereafter. How did you *feel* when you saw the deceased? What did you think? And what did you do next? We'll take the first callers after this brief message from our sponsors."

Webster pressed the mute button on his remote-control. More bizarre commercials — florists, a different manufacturer of stationery, The Dead Channel promoting sales of its calendar for the coming year. The calendar, said the text on the screen, cost "only $19.95"; daily little blurbs provided the year and circumstances of "over five hundred Great Deaths in History." What was that, four cents per blurb? Webster was glad he'd shut off the sound.

But, snuffling, he was also staring out of the corner of his eye at the telephone. It sat on the end table, where he had moved the empty soup mug and the nearly-empty glass. He thought he had a story for Rita de Jesus, although he didn't know if he'd actually have the courage to pick up the phone and dial it. And he had to get that bed rest. On the other hand, there was the possibility of hearing Rita de Jesus's voice and the hint of her half-smile in his ear, murmuring consolation and sympathy, and the restlessness in his pajamas was clearly voting in favor of this possibility. But what were the chances he'd even get through? Weird though it was, this program almost certainly had thousands of regular viewers, probably a hundred of whom had lunged for their own phones the instant the 900-number had lit up on the screen. No way. He'd never get through.

He was on the brink of shutting the television off when the commercial break ended; on the screen once again, again superimposed with "The Dead Channel Live's" title and logo, was Rita de Jesus's haunting face. She still had that smile, Webster saw while pressing the mute button again, this time to cancel its function, but she now seemed somehow to be, well, smiling in order to cover up some awful disappointment. Something about her eyes, which were a mournful brown. Webster put the remote-control down on the end table, next to the phone, and blew his nose. His ears popped.

"... and please," Rita de Jesus was saying as Webster's hearing returned, "no calls from bereavement professionals. We're hoping to learn how first contact with death has affected *ordinary* lives, people who do not deal with death every day or every week. We're still waiting for our first caller, so in the meantime, Doctor, why don't we discuss..."

She was off with the psychologist on an arcane analysis of Jungian death-archetypes; the sound was on, but Webster was not really attending to the discussion. His gaze was nailed to the shimmering margin between Rita de Jesus's knees and the hemline of her green dress, and what his mind was hearing (to the extent it was hearing anything) was the seductive voice of the telephone: *No callers yet*, it whispered to him from the end table.

"Good evening, 'The Dead Channel Live,'" said a cheerful young male voice at the other end of the line. It sounded like the voice of the announcer, the deadcaster or whatever they called

themselves, the one who had demonstrated the Normalized Mortality Rate for eastern Idaho. Did the deadcasters do double duty answering the phones? He wished Jack Llongo had answered the phone, he'd like to tell him how much he'd appreciated his unaffected style and delivery—

"Hello?" said the young man's voice. "Is anyone there? Do you have something for Rita? Don't be afraid, is someone there?"

"Yes," confirmed Webster, his voice sounding tinny to him, disembodied and far-off. "I, I have a story for Rita de Jesus."

"You're not a doctor, are you, sir? Or a bereavement professional?"

"No. I work in an office in The City."

The young man did not seem to care what city Webster worked in; he merely asked Webster his name, where he was calling from, and "the general nature of your story, save the details for Rita but we just need to make sure it's all right to put on the air." Sniffling and wiping at his nose, Webster told him only that it was a story about when he was a boy and encountered death for the very first time. The young man seemed satisfied with the description itself but not with the pneumatic wetness in which Webster had packaged it.

"Are you sure you'll be all right, sir?"

"Hmm? Oh, my voice, ha, don't worry, I've just caught something going around. Nothing to worry about."

On the TV, Rita de Jesus was saying, "Well, Doctor, I believe we have our first caller." Suddenly without warning there was *that voice*, in his ear: "Go ahead, sir, you have a story for us?" It was followed a few seconds later by the on-screen Rita de Jesus repeating, "Go ahead, sir, you have a story for us?" Her chin was lifted, she was looking right into the camera and *into Webster's living room*.

He sat up, tossed the afghan aside, buttoned another button on his pajama top, snuffled, and said, "Uhhh..."

Rita de Jesus began explaining something to him on the phone about a time-delay audio system because of which he should turn his television's sound off, when suddenly there was his voice, horribly magnified and distorted by the television speaker ("Uhhh..." it groaned, God did he really *sound* like that?), and Rita de Jesus's voice followed it — repeating on the air, word for word, her explanation of the time delay. "So go right ahead, speak up nice and clear," she said again in public, as she had said only a moment ago in private, "just turn your TV's volume down, all right?" Smitten, compliant, Webster pressed the mute button.

And just like that, whatever he had called to tell her stood up and bolted from his mind.

"Sir?" said Rita de Jesus's voice in his ear after a respectful but uncomfortable pause. "Are you there?"

In a panic, Webster lunged to his feet and began pacing around his living room, carrying the phone with him. The story was something about when he was a kid, he knew that much. But what about when he was a kid?

Maybe he could jog his memory by just beginning that way. "I was, uh, I was just a kid at the time," he said. Nothing further came to him. Death, it had something to do with death, seeing death first-hand, when had he ever seen death up-close when he was a kid? His nose running, he sniffed a bit, and liked the piteous effect so much that he added a whimper.

"There, there," said the telephone-Rita de Jesus into his ear; on the screen, she and the psychologist were silent, attentive, and then the television-Rita de Jesus nodded and mouthed: *There, there*. Her voice and words, her dress and the, yes, *bereaved* expression on her face, it all

suddenly put him in mind again of his ex-wife and then his ex-girlfriend and then his ex-wife and his ex-girlfriend again, phantom profiles of the two of them (and the two Rita de Jesuses, in his ear and on-screen) oscillating rapidly back and forth like two sides of a giant coin spinning on its edge...

Not sure where he was going — but certain he had to go somewhere, anywhere, if he was not to lose the two Rita de Jesuses as well as his ex-wife and -girlfriend — he stumbled on:

"Yeah, I was, uh, a kid." He paused to wipe his nose. "And my grandfather took me out to the barn first thing one morning" — his *grandfather*? both of his grandfathers had died before he was even born! — "and he, uh, he showed me..." Showed him what? A farmhand, a pig, his wee-wee...?

"Sir?" said Rita de Jesus into his ear. "Perhaps you should call back again a bit later after you get yourself together?" On-screen, the psychologist was whispering behind her hand to Rita de Jesus, who nodded crisply and raised her chin again, her lips moving in silence: *Sir? Perhaps you should...*

"No, I'll be all right." Of all the unlikely phrases he had just shared with this stranger, that seemed the unlikeliest. Yet here he was, still headed for some unforeseen destination:

"... my grandfather, I called him Peppy" — *Peppy*? — "he, uh, he took me to a, a, a — what do you call it, a stall, that's it, Peppy took me to a stall in the barn and showed me the man" — man? what man? — "the dead man." He paused, exhausted by the imaginative effort, his nose — now that he'd been talking actively for more than a second or two — running at high tide. He blew his nose on the paper towel, which was now sopping. The phone cord would not reach to the kitchen, no chance to replace the paper towel by heading that way. Maybe the powder room...

"There was a dead man in your grandfather's barn," prompted an unfamiliar female voice. The psychologist, audibly antsier than Rita de Jesus. "Had he died of some disease? How did you know he was dead?"

Webster now stood just inside the doorway of his powder room, the telephone cord stretched tight behind him. He couldn't reach all the way to the toilet paper without dropping the phone — wait, he could lean against the wall, *streeeetch* out one foot and... Ha! Got it! He took the end of the roll of toilet paper from between his toes and unraveled about five, maybe seven yards of the stuff; he didn't want to have to repeat the maneuver.

"Hmm?" he said. "Oh, no, the man, he was a hobo, a tramp, and he, uh, didn't die of sickness." He paused to blow his nose, wadded the strip of toilet paper into a tight ball and placed it on the plate next to the soggy paper towel. So the man hadn't died of sickness, he thought: okay, then what had he died of?

Wishing for a second he could get to the kitchen, pour some more Coke, maybe let a Saltine dissolve in his mouth to dry him out a bit, suddenly he remembered the 7-11 where he had bought his sick-food on the way home tonight.

"He was a tramp?" said the psychologist, nearly spitting with impatience. Sniffling, Webster was gratified to see on the TV that Rita de Jesus was holding a forefinger to her lovely lips, silencing the psychologist as though to say, *Let him tell it his way*. God, he was falling in love with this woman. Maybe he'd have a chance to talk to her privately at the end of this story, however it turned out, when they broke for a commercial or something...

"Yes," he went on, inspired by his memory of the 7-11 and by Rita de Jesus's support, his confidence growing although he hadn't worked all the details out yet, "he was a tramp. An American Indian, a, uh, an Apache. Everybody in my grandfather's town knew him. He made his

living by selling handicrafts, Pap— er, Peppy told me." Another pause for dramatic effect, and to watch the image on the television catch up with reality. Rita de Jesus and her guest were listening, spellbound by what Webster imagined to be his sudden eloquence. He tore off another foot or so the ribbon of toilet paper, mopped at his nose, sniffed, and continued.

"Yeah, handicrafts. Like little knick-knacks and things, he used a soldering iron, like a, uh, a wood-burning tool? He, uh, he moved there from Oklahoma and he brought this soldering iron, wood-burner, whatever, with him. And he made these plaques, like there was one hanging there in Peppy's barn, it said, uh, it said" — said what? ah, *perfect*! — "it had a quote on it, from Groucho Marx, you know? Peppy always loved the Marx Brothers and this, uh, this hobo had done up a little plaque for him and it was hanging on the wall of the, uh, the barn." Another pause to let that sink in, perhaps to give Rita de Jesus a little ripple of suspense. Goosebumps. He sniffed again.

Before Rita de Jesus could shiver — whatever her face registered right now it was not goosebumps — the psychologist butted in. "Sir? All this about the plaques is very nice but you were saying the tramp was *dead*, how did the tramp *die*?" Webster made a face at the receiver and waited a couple of seconds, snuffling, hoping to see the television-Rita de Jesus shush her guest again. But no, in fact she nodded her head as though in agreement.

Wounded, Webster sniffed and sniffed again. "I'm sorry," he said, "I just remembered that plaque in Peppy's barn. I, uh, I haven't thought of that in years." Ha, to say the least.

"So there was this tramp," he went on, "this Apache hobo. He must have been working on one of his plaques up in the loft. There was" — whoa, wait, how could he operate a soldering iron in the loft of a barn? — "there was a, uh, like an extension cord running up the wall from an outlet on the ground floor." Utterly spent, rushing now to the conclusion: "... and he, well, the floor up there had collapsed, see, and the tramp fell out of the loft onto the ground right on top of his soldering iron. It went in his mouth. He looked like he swallowed it, it was poking out the back of his neck, and the, uh" — groping for a dramatic finale, something with which to sweep Rita de Jesus off her feet — "the tip was real hot, I guess, and the skin on his neck was like, uh, well, cauterized. The back of his hair was still smoking."

Silence on the phone; absolute stillness on the screen, Rita de Jesus at the moment seeming barely in control of some dark emotive force.

"... so anyhow, that's when Peppy pointed to the hobo and then he pointed to his wrist and up to the plaque hanging on the wall of the barn and he read it to me, 'Either he's dead or my watch has stopped.'"

The silence on his phone didn't tell him anything. He longed for the TV picture to catch up, so he could find out if Rita de Jesus had collapsed and was sobbing inconsolably or what. He pressed the mute button, and there was his voice from the speaker: "...watch has stopped."

A split-second more of silence, and then Webster heard from the TV speaker something which he had not heard from the telephone receiver: a coarse *Haw haw haw!* from somewhere out of camera range, a sound man or gaffer or cameraman or somebody. Jack Llongo, maybe.

"I see," said a chilly voice in his ear. "I see, indeed. Thank you for calling." She waved her hand, then there was a click and a buzz.

Webster couldn't believe it. She'd cut him off! Rita de Jesus had *cut, him,* OFF without so much as a single simple question about his emotional state at the time of his first exposure to death! And the so-called psychologist had let her get away with it!

He hung up the receiver, flattened and breathless. On the television, Rita de Jesus said

again, “Thank you for calling.” Here, though, it was followed not by a click and a buzz but by some kind of look which passed briefly between the two women, a look which communicated absolutely nothing to Webster.

Then Rita de Jesus said, “‘The Dead Channel Live’ will be back in a moment. Now this.”

More of those stupid commercials: a local caterer specializing in “bereavement receptions”; a life-insurance company; a different life-insurance company, this one specializing in insurance for married military veterans with no children, a steady income, and the psychological wherewithal to PICK UP THE PHONE AND CALL **NOW!!!**

She cut me off, Webster was still thinking. And he’d been on the phone for, cripes, close to fifteen minutes. What was that — like twenty-five, thirty dollars? He blew his nose. When “The Dead Channel Live” returned, he took a final look at Rita de Jesus’s uncaring lips and plunging neckline, its dark emerald recesses now suggesting an arctic grotto. Then he pointed his remote-control at her forehead, and shot her with the channel-down button.

The old-movie channel’s current fare was a comic psychological suspense melodrama starring Jack Oakie. Oakie was a man who had awakened one morning with no memory of anything, including his name; on the floor next to his bed was a pistol from which a single bullet had been fired, and on the floor in the next room lay the spread-eagled body of a chimpanzee (dressed in a plaid sportcoat, vest, and four-in-hand) which had been shot dead. For the rest of the movie, presumably, Oakie would fight to clear his good name (once he’d remembered it) while mugging shamelessly, maybe crooning some inconsequential ditty, and eventually winning the reluctant love of the chimpanzee’s trainer, played (Webster bet) by a beautiful young actress who never appeared in another movie, not even one as bad as this.

But the moviemakers surprised him. He was right about the general plot line — the ditty which Oakie sang rhymed “chimpanzee” and “I’m just a man, see” — but the chimp’s trainer turned out to be Myrna Loy.

How about that, he thought, and lay down once again on the sofa, afghan pulled up to his chin. Myrna Loy, no kidding.

He dozed off and on, sneezing himself awake once or twice, his dreams getting all mixed up with the silly film: Jack Oakie as an Apache hobo, Myrna Loy as a talk-show hostess, her khaki safari clothing suddenly emerald green, her collar loose — and lying on the floor in the Victorian parlor, clad in a camel-colored sportcoat and green slacks, Webster himself, a dead monkey with a bullet through his heart. Myrna Loy sobbed, inconsolably.