



# THE CHUTE

Scott H. Urban



ELEMENT 118 BOOKS

THE CHUTE by Scott H. Urban

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Miriam leaned over the dirty-clothes bin so that her voice would carry up the laundry chute more clearly.

“All right, Linnie, you can send the sheets down now.”

“Kay, Mom!” her daughter confirmed enthusiastically from two floors above. The metallic echo made Linnie’s voice sound deeper and older than her five natural years.

*She’s a blessing*, Miriam thought of her daughter, not for the first time. On a warm Saturday morning like this, most kids her age would be screaming to go outside and play or pleading for solitude so they could watch the cartoons in peace. But Linnie was only too eager to help, especially since she realized her Daddy was down at the office early, working overtime on a complicated legal brief, and wouldn’t be home at least until lunch time.

“Thanks, honey!”

Miriam could picture her daughter as she knelt at the laundry chute opening located under the sink in the second-floor bathroom. There was a soft rustling as Linnie began feeding a bedsheet into the chute with the deliberate care of a pre-schooler. (“Always begin with a corner first,” Miriam had explained several weeks earlier, “because if you start shoving it down willy-nilly, the sheet might get jammed in there.” Linnie had thought the phrase ‘willy-nilly’ unbearably funny; her giggle fit had lasted ten minutes.) Miriam heard the gentle *whoosh* of displaced air; the first bedsheet fell into the clothes bin—

—and Miriam felt something splash up and hit her in the face.

A stench, reminiscent of week-old fish but infinitely worse, assaulted her senses. She automatically reached up and wiped at her cheeks and lips with her hands, at the same time fighting back a gag reflex.

Except for Ken's workspace, the basement was poorly lit. Only a single bare bulb of indeterminate wattage lit the laundry area, making the washer, dryer, and stacked boxes cast enshrouding shadows. Miriam, arms outstretched, stepped back a couple paces so the light could fall on her. Her stomach seized up once more: she saw her palms coated with a foamy crimson slime the consistency of warm jello. Within it swirled black flecks, like old scabs picked from healing flesh. Unbidden thoughts of afterbirth residue rose in Miriam's mind. "God," she wheezed, her voice raspy at first; then she shouted piercingly, "Lynnie! Lynnie!"

The girl must have caught the panic in her mother's voice; Miriam heard "Coming. . ." trail away from the laundry chute as Lynnie ran out of the bathroom.

Like a tormented martyr evaluating her convictions too late, Miriam stood petrified. Her gaze falling on the clothes bin, she saw that the bedsheet was soaked with the noxious substance, now staining the clothes underneath. *What in the—? How had—?*

Seconds later, Lynnie's footsteps clattered down the wooden basement steps. "Mom? What is it? What hap—?"

Initially, Miriam had thought this was some prank of Lynnie's. Not that her daughter had ever done anything like this in the past. But kids were kids, and God knew the corrupting influences were all around: anti-social peer groups, drugs, violent media messages. Miriam knew it wouldn't be long before Lynnie pushed the boundaries to see how much she could get away with. But Lynnie's faltering voice and gape-mouthed expression turned aside Miriam's accusations. Realizing the ghoulish aspect she must present, Miriam turned and walked briskly to the deep-basined sink on the dryer's left.

"I'll call an ambulance," Lynnie said.

There was nothing left of the child; Lynnie was all business. "The number's taped on the kitchen phone." She began to run for the stairs.

*She thinks I've cut myself*, Miriam realized. "No, honey," she called. "It's all right; come on back." *She was only concerned for me*, Miriam thought thankfully. *She's still my good kid, still my baby . . . for a while longer at least.*

Hesitantly coming back into the dim circle of light, obviously wondering if she should still call the ambulance anyway, Lynnie finally saw the vomitous bedsheet in the clothes bin. Only then did she make a normal five-year-old reaction: "Eeeww! Gross! What happened to *that*?"

Miriam was bent over the sink, scrubbing her hands with scalding water. The red scum clung to her skin greasily and only reluctantly pooled at the drain.

“I don’t know what happened, babe.” She couldn’t resist asking: “You didn’t—didn’t do anything to the sheet, did you?”

“No way!” Linnie wrinkled her button nose. “It stinks, too! Worse than shi—Sorry, Mom—than poop!”

Miriam gave her daughter a reproving glance; she couldn’t curb her mental impulses even under the most bizarre circumstances. “Something must have happened to the sheet on the way down the chute,” Miriam said, at last cleansing the worst of the ichor from her hands and cheeks (although disgusting tidbits clung tenaciously under her fingernails). “I don’t know what. We’ll have your Daddy look at it when he gets home. Look, Linnie, I won’t ask you to help me clean this up,”—*I don’t even want to think about cleaning it up*, Miriam noted reproachfully—“but would you please bring the rest of the dirty things down to me? In the clothes basket—don’t send them down the chute.”

Miriam turned when her daughter didn’t immediately reply. Linnie had inched closer to the clothes bin, approaching it with the mixed awe and revulsion of a sparrow in the serpent’s hypnotic stare. Rivulets of the rank substance ran down the sides of the bin, giving it the appearance of a pagan altar. A pulled-back ponytail falling over one shoulder, Linnie’s head was cocked to one side, like a canine picking up high-frequency messages. With a start, she came back to herself and said brightly, “Sure, Mom. Back in a minute.”

*Should I leave this mess for Ken to see? Miriam wondered. If I just tell him about it, he’ll never believe me.*

But then the thought of that gut-wrenched smell permeating her home—especially the kitchen, right overhead—revolted her. Realizing she was going to have to wash the stained items two, maybe three times, she turned the sink taps on full. She was determined to rinse the gelatinous pulp from her clothes as best she could before throwing them in the washer.

\* \* \*

“All right, all right. In a minute.” Ken had breezed through the door only five minutes before and now held up his hands to block whatever Miriam had to say. “I want to coordinate the rest of the afternoon with you first. Just to make sure we’re on the same wavelength.” Without really looking at his wife, he headed for the wet bar. “We have to pick up my suits from the dry cleaner’s before two so I have something to wear tonight. We need to have the baby-sitter here by

four-thirty so you can go over things with her. We're due at the club by five-fifteen for cocktails, then dinner's at six. Have you planned what you're going to wear? How about that strapless black number? Good. Expect this to be a late one. Once MacCauley gets started, nothing short of a judge's restraining order can shut him up. Just bear with it."

"I'll try."

Miriam truly had no idea what they were attending that night; some bar association function that required Ken's presence. She hoped some of the other attorneys' wives would be there so they could trade barbs whispered under their breath. "Did you get the work done at the office?"

"No," Ken answered ruefully, swizzling a makeshift martini. "Probably have to go back again tomorrow." He downed half the drink.

Perceiving an opening in the conversation, Miriam said, "Something happened this morning. . ." and briefly told him what had taken place in the basement. "I'd like you to take a look at it sometime."

Ken nodded. "Sure, sure. Soon as I get the chance." He finished the rest of the drink. "Sounds as if another pipe might be leaking into the laundry chute."

"I thought of that," Miriam admitted. "But then why isn't it dripping into the basement?"

Ken shrugged: the facts weren't in. He began to say something, but right then the study door imploded and Lynn timeran in crying, "Daddy! Daddy!" Ken swept her up in his arms and spun her around the room like a mad dervish.

"Hey, here's my cupcake, my marshmallow," he said coyly, and then buried his lips in his daughter's neck and resoundingly blubbered her. She laughed and screamed at the same time, clawing his dress shirt to get away.

"How's my pumpkin?" he asked, setting her down, the two of them breathless.

"Fine."

Lynn timer smoothed his ruffled top. "Dad, can we all go out to the Pizza Parade tonight?" She struck a coquettish pose calculated to twist her father's heart.

"Lynette!" admonished Miriam. "I've been telling you all morning that Mommy and Daddy are going out tonight and Stacy is going to watch you."

Lynnie frowned without looking at her mother, her expectant expression demanding a reply from Ken.

“No can do, babe. Your old man has to put in an appearance at this shindig tonight.” Ken frowned in sympathy with his daughter.

Innocuously twirling a finger in her ponytail, Lynnie asked, “What’s a ‘shindig’?”

Ken feigned a look of exasperation. “Look, you’ll have a good time with the sitter this evening. Before you know it, it’ll be bedtime and -- “

“But I want *you* to stay home and play with me.”

“We’ll be home all day tomorrow,” he assured her.

“Yeah, unless you have to go back to that stupid office.”

Ken jerked back; Lynnie knew she’d scored a direct hit with that torpedo. The attorney looked to his wife as if in search of a life preserver. Miriam’s non-committal look refused him any assistance, as if to say, “You got yourself into this, you can get yourself out.”

A grating buzz reverberated through the floorboards, just loud enough that it couldn’t be ignored. “The washer,” Miriam threw out casually, pushing herself away from the wet bar. “I sure hope that load came clean this time. It’s the third cycle they’ve been through and I don’t really want to think about getting rid of three hundred dollars’ worth of clothes.”

Miriam’s backward glance at Ken underscored her earlier request.

Ken waved her on irritably, then sat cross-legged on the beige carpeting, pulling Lynnie down with him.

“Are you still my angel-food cake?”

“Sure am, Daddy.”

“Okay, here’s some more of those depressing facts of life. . . .”

\* \* \*

The key jangled against the doorknob, as if the owner's hand were shaking or the lock were actively denying admittance. Amidst a mumbled curse, the front door slammed against the doorstep and shuddered back on its hinges. Through the portal came heated voices and the cool evening breeze.

"I swear, if this is just her way of getting attention from us—" Ken wrestled his way out of his overcoat and flung it without aim over the couch.

Flicking off a cable horror movie with the remote, Stacy hurriedly got up from Ken's recliner, brushing down her purple-tinted perm.

Miriam, ignoring Stacy for the moment, swung on her husband. "*I* will take care of this, at least for the time being. Got that?" Her tone allowed no room for disagreement. She turned to the babysitter, who was prancing from toe to toe, wringing her fingers in dismay.

"Oh God, Mr. and Mrs. Sullivan. I'm sorry I called you away from your dinner—"

Miriam cut through the apology. "Don't worry, Stacy, that's what you're here for. Where's Linnie now?"

"Well, she's in bed now. I mean, everything's really all right. I tried to call the hall and tell you you could stay after all, but you'd already left."

Ken couldn't help muttering "Wonderful!" under his breath.

Refusing to rise to the bait, Miriam asked, "Tell me again what happened, Stacy."

The babysitter toyed with her fingerless leather gloves. "Linnie and I were having a good time, playing in front of the TV and watching shows. Then I told her to go put on her pajamas and, you know, do any of her bathroom things. She went upstairs and into the bathroom and locked the door. For a while, I just stayed here in the living room. Finally I realized that I, like, hadn't heard her come back out, so I went upstairs and asked her, through the door, if she was okay. She didn't answer right away, but I could hear sounds, like someone talking real low and soft, coming from inside."

"Doesn't sound like Linnie." Ken warily eyed the stairway as if it led to a stranger.

"Sure doesn't," Miriam couldn't help agreeing. "Go on, Stacy."



“I told her to open the door for me, but she wouldn’t. I asked her if she was sick, but I didn’t get an answer. Then I told her if she didn’t open the door, I’d call her Mom and Dad. That usually does the trick with the kids I’m babysitting, right? But she still didn’t say anything, and I thought maybe she’d fainted and was, like, talking while she was unconscious, you know? But about three or four minutes after I called you, she came out of the bathroom. She said something she ate had made her sick and she had to sit on the potty for a long time and it hurt too much to talk. So after that, I let her go to bed.” Stacy’s eyes widened in fear. “Oh, God, you don’t think I should have taken her to the emergency room, do you? Jesus, I hope she’s all right. . . .”

Miriam laid a calming hand on Stacy’s shoulder. “You did fine, Stacy. I’m just sorry you ran into trouble. I’m going to check on her now. Ken, would you take Stacy home?”

“Gotcha.” Ken watched his wife run upstairs as Stacy gathered her purse and coat. The babysitter lived within a comfortable walking distance, but everyone concerned felt more secure when Ken drove her home late after dark.

Ken and Stacy were inside the car before either spoke. Ken backed the Mercedes carefully out of the drive, leaving his home’s small pool of light. His house was situated on the rearmost street of the subdivision. Street lights were infrequent and dim, and at this hour, there were few motorists, no pedestrians.

Stacy cracked her chewing gum with a shotgun *pop*. “I really do hope Linnie feels better.”

Ken waved aside her concern. “Don’t worry about it. Even if she is sick, kids bounce right back.” Ken already knew Stacy’s babysitting rates; he reached inside his suitcoat pocket and brought out the money he owed her.

“Thanks, Mr. Sullivan. Think you’ll need me again soon?”

“I’ll have to check my calendar when I get back home. Seems I remember something coming up next weekend, but I can’t be sure off the top of my head. We’ll give you a call later in the week.”

“Sounds good.” Stacy sank back against the headrest, sighing heavily and cracking her gum once more. “Do you need . . . anything else?”

Ken grinned, his teeth almost glowing in the pale dashboard light. “Yeah. . . .” He reached inside his pocket again and pulled out a folded twenty. “Same as last time.”

“You wanna pull over somewhere?”

“I’m just going to keep driving very slowly. We’ll draw less attention if we keep moving. No one’ll notice.” Ken adjusted the front seat backwards several settings.

Taking the chewing gum from her mouth, Stacy stuck it to the pocket of her leather jacket. Then she bent to the side, nestling her head in Ken’s lap. As her hands worked at his encumbering clothes, Ken ran his fingers through her long blond-and-purple hair.

\* \* \*

“Sweetheart? Are you still awake?”

Miriam quietly pressed the bedroom door in farther; a wedge of light from the hall fell across Linnie’s bed.

“Mommy?” Linnie was lying on her back. With one hand she held Mr. Claws, her stuffed bear. (“See, ‘Claws’ will also remind me of *Santa* Claus, who brought him,” Linnie had explained one Christmas morning.) With her other hand, she knuckled her eyes, heavy with sleep.

Miriam cautiously entered the room, as if she feared her footsteps alone could cause her daughter additional discomfort. “You know Stacy called us home.”

“I know. Wish she didn’t.”

“Well, darling, when you didn’t answer her in the bathroom, she got worried about you.”

Linnie’s eyes fell to the handworked bed-quilt. She began fingering the edge. “But I didn’t feel good,” she said, as if that would explain everything.

“How do you feel now?” Miriam pulled her daughter up into a sitting position and put a palm of her forehead.

“Fine. Really.” With a start, Linnie looked to her mother, eyes wide with apprehension. “Am I gonna get grounded?”

Miriam wanted to frown, but couldn’t resist smiling. “I don’t know . . . I don’t think so. You don’t seem to have a temperature and your color is all right. What do you think made you sick?”

“I dunno.” Lynn timer herself fall back against the mattress with a resounding thump. “Maybe I just had too much buttered popcorn with Stacy.”

“That’ll do it. You want some Pepto?”

“Hunh-uh.” Lynn timer shook her head. “Just wanna go back to sleep.”

Miriam raised her eyebrows. This was a first; Lynn timer usually had to be tied to the bed. “Okay.” Miriam bent down and kissed her daughter’s forehead, squeezed her shoulder. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

As Miriam stood to leave, a small voice behind her asked, “Mommy?”

“What, darling?”

“Do you know anything about hunting?”

“Hunting?” Miriam chuckled with disbelief. “What do you need to know about hunting—especially at this hour?”

“Oh . . . nothing. I’ll ask Daddy tomorrow.”

“All right. Sleep tight.” Shaking her head, Miriam left the room, leaving the door slightly ajar so that a comforting glow would diffuse the shadows surrounding Lynn timer’s bed.

\* \* \*

Ken did have to go to the office Sunday, but Lynn timer refrained from making a scene. Taking advantage of the free time, Miriam caught up on some of her secretarial duties for the women’s club “Help for the Homeless Committee.” She lost track of Lynn timer, and what was occupying her daughter. Later that evening, to make up for Saturday, Ken took them all out to The Pizza Parade. They spent far too much money in return for flat cola, thick, cheese-dripping slices of pizza, too-sweet desserts, and idiotic video games, thoroughly enjoying every minute of it. In the midst of dinner, Lynn timer impulsively hugged both her parents at the same time, staining their shirts with unwiped, greasy fingers. Miriam met Ken’s gaze over Lynn timer’s shoulder and was surprised—and somewhat pleased—to see the barely-contained emotion on his face.

Back home, Miriam led Lynn timer upstairs to the bathroom. Although old enough to bathe herself, Lynn timer sometimes overlooked scrubbing in favor of bubble-blowing. In her enthusiasm for water, Lynn timer would sometimes turn the room into a small swamp. “Go on and get your

jammies on,” Miriam direct, playfully smacking Lynn timer’s bare bottom. “I’ve got to clean up your lake here. I’ll be there in a minute—and don’t forget to say your prayers.”

Finished with the bathroom, Miriam went to tuck Lynn timer in bed. As she drew near the bedroom, she could hear Lynn timer praying. The sound—an innocent child’s voice with an adult’s serious intonation—brought Miriam to a halt just outside the door. Realizing her own sentimentality, Miriam couldn’t help the lump in her throat as she eavesdropped on her daughter’s care-filled reverence.

“ . . . and bless all the teachers at my pre-school,” Lynn timer was saying. “And bless Mr. Claws, too. And now that you’re here, please don’t hurt Mommy or Daddy. I promise I’ll be good and do whatever you say. Amen.”

Miriam’s eyes narrowed at the last few phrases. She turned into Lynn timer’s room and saw the girl already lying under the covers. “Honey, what did you mean just then?”

“When, Mommy?”

“When you were praying—what did you mean when you said, ‘Now that you’re here, don’t hurt Mommy or Daddy?’”

“You were listening while I said my prayers.” Lynn timer frowned at the invasion. “That’s not very nice.”

Miriam sat on the edge of the bed and took Lynn timer’s hand in hers. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t help overhearing. But I still want to know what you were talking about. That didn’t sound like your usual prayers.”

“Well . . . ” Lynn timer wriggled her head from side to side on her pillow as if trying to dislodge the words from her mind. “I just meant that . . . I’m so happy when you and me and Daddy all spend time together, that I don’t want nothing to happen to any of us.”

“‘Anything’,” Miriam couldn’t help correcting her automatically. “Honey, it’s all right. Nothing’s going to happen to Daddy or me. Lynn timer, has something frightened you? Are you scared?”

It looked as if for a moment Lynn timer was going to say something, but then she sucked her lower lip into her mouth, shaking her head ‘no.’

Miriam was unconvinced, but uncertain as to what to say or do at that point. “You know you can come to me or Daddy whenever you’re scared, don’t you?” she said in what she hoping was a reassuring voice. “I always want you to feel like you can talk to me about what you’re thinking and feeling. No matter what it is—and no matter how old my little girl gets.” The last with a smile; Linnie grinned too. “Understand? I’m going now. You sleep well and remember: everything’s all right.”

Miriam kissed Linnie again and withdrew from the room, feeling not at all as confident about her family’s safety as she sounded.

\* \* \*

Although some of the nerve-deadening whine crept in around the earphones, Miriam still thought it was more fun to vacuum with a Walkman on. Her favorite Golden Oldies station was delivering “an hour-long commercial-free Beatles-Block straight to her ears,” and she was bumping and grinding to “Twist and Shout.” Her cleaning motions increasingly automatic, Miriam couldn’t help thinking back to the weekends she’d spent with Ken, turning Friday nights, Saturdays, and Sundays into a kaleidoscopic blur of noise, drink, and flesh-on-flesh.

The vacuum cleaner’s rubber guard stuttered against the baseboard, the vibration bringing Miriam back to Tuesday afternoon. Leaving the vacuum running at Linnie’s door, Miriam entered and hastily circled the bedroom, picking up stray clothes, toys, and picture books and tossing them on the bed. She went back to the vacuum and angled it into the room. She began making her labyrinthine way around the desk, a bean-bag chair, a toy chest, several dressers and bookcases, as well as the bed. With her free left hand, she tapped a rhythm against the furniture she passed—sometimes in beat with the radio’s song, more often on her own musical tangent. As she worked along the left side of Linnie’s bed, eyes half-closed, vacuuming by remote control, she reached out to deliver a staccato downbeat to the side of Pouches’ cage.

It wasn’t there.

“Whoa,” Miriam muttered, surprised, turning off the vacuum and pulling the miniature earphones away from her head. The music tried to fill the room, a tinny, sibilant effect. Pouches was Linnie’s pet hamster. Together with his mate (who resided with their neighbor’s daughter), they were forever producing Junior Pouches that both families had to pawn off on other kids in the neighborhood. For a moment, Miriam thought she had the wrong dresser. But no, she’d fed the darn rodent often enough, and besides, there was a ring of dust around a clear, polished rectangle. Oddly, she missed the sound of tiny feet scampering through the sawdust, the teeth-gritting screech of the exercise wheel.

Lynn timer's pet had given Miriam worry-lines, and they now marked her face as she searched for the cage. Under the bed, behind the desk, finally, in the closet—and sure enough, there it stood on one end, empty now and hastily cleaned.

“What now . . . ?” she wondered. Glancing at the Care Bears wall-clock (the hands revolving obscenely in Cheer Bear's tummy), she noted it was 2:35, just about time for the pre-school van to drop Lynn timer off. She started down the stairs to intercept her daughter as soon as she came in. Before she was half-way down the steps, the front door blew in, Lynn timer calling out, “Home, Mommy!” Miriam startled her daughter by materializing at the foot of the stairs in front of her. Usually at this hour, Miriam was in the living room, watching her favorite soap on the wide-screen.

“Hello.” Miriam's greeting was curt, and Lynn timer could already tell that something was up. “How was school?”

Lynn timer didn't even have the standard reply, “Fine,” out before Miriam was asking, “Young lady, where is Pouches?”

The girl was awkwardly tugged her windbreaker off, her face conveniently turned away from her mother. She paused, arms akimbo, a moment too long. “I—I decided to give him away.”

“Give him away?” Miriam repeated, as if she hadn't heard correctly the first time.

Lynn timer held her hands outward toward her mother, as if they were supporting the worries of the world. “Well, you're always sayin' how I never take good care of him. And you say he stinks the place up. And you never want to help find homes for his babies, and he was getting to be a hassle, and I didn't think you'd mind!”

“What did you do with him?” If Miriam knew her fists were planted on her hips, she would have changed her pose, but more important things were on her mind.

Lynn timer swung her windbreaker against the floor. “I gave him to Bert Cooperman.”

“What about the cage? Don't do that to your coat, you'll ruin it!”

“Well . . . he didn't need it. He already has some hamsters, so I thought he would be a good person to give Pouches to.”

“Oh, really? And what did Bert's mother think about all this?”

Lynnie shrugged. “I dunno.”

“You don’t know? You mean, you didn’t ask his mother if it was all right?” By now, Miriam was looking down on her daughter from directly overhead; her questions were rising above the third degree. Lynnie wasn’t used to this kind of verbal intensity. Her lower lip began to swell as her head drooped.

“Maybe Bert’s mother doesn’t want another hamster to clean up after. Maybe she’s got enough worries. Did you ever think about that?”

“I—I don’t know. Don’t ’member.”

Miriam could detect the hitch in Lynnie’s voice and knew she was close to crying. It shocked her to realize that she was expecting—even anticipating—her daughter’s tears. “I think the least you could have done was to bring it up with me beforehand.” Miriam toned down her voice, leaned back to stop towering over her child.

Lynnie’s head bobbed as she tried to swallow past the lump in her throat. “I thought you’d like it . . . that I got rid of Pouches.”

“Honey, I just wish you’d thought about it a little more. And I wish you’d come to me first.” Miriam tousled her daughter’s hair. “Look, forget about it for now. Come on into the kitchen with me and we’ll have some juice and sandwiches.”

Lynnie nodded without answering. Expecting her daughter to follow right along behind, Miriam was in the kitchen pouring the glasses before she realized she was alone. She craned her neck to peer around the kitchen doorway. Lynnie was wringing her windbreaker like a penitent fingering beads, and she stared at the ceiling while glistening tears ran down her cheeks. Miriam thought she heard the girl saying something huskily: “Sorry, Pouches . . . I’m really, *really* sorry. . . .”

*At least she’s contrite, Miriam thought. If she were able to give her pet away without a second thought, I’d have to worry about her.*

\* \* \*

The table was set, the roast had about five minutes more to go, Lynnie was washing her hands, and Ken was home on time for a change. It was such a rare streak of positive momentum that Miriam felt like making the most of it. She made a circuit of the bathrooms, gathering damp, wadded towels (as well as unused guest hand-towels) and ran to the basement, determined to get

a load going before they sat down to eat. If she could get some of the laundry out of the way, she might see her way to clear some free time tomorrow, Saturday.

She started the cycle and turned to go back up the steps, automatically checking the level of the clothes in the dirties' bin as she did so. She ship-hopped to a halt, seeing something in the fabric and shadows that didn't belong. "Jesus God, what's *that*?" Miriam whispered. First, there had been that vile, sticky red crap (and it never had come completely out of all the clothes it had touched). And now—"Anything but a rat," she prayed. "I'll even take the stains again, as long as it's not a rat." As if the bin contained radioactive waste, Miriam edged nearer to it but swore not to touch it. Half-afraid to see what the amorphous lump was, she moved to the side so that her own shadow fell away.

With a start, she recognized a chicken breast from the previous night's meal: a left-over she distinctly remembered wrapping and putting in the fridge.

Gingerly, with finger and thumb, Miriam picked up the greasy frier, wincing as she noted it had been resting on her best silk nightgown. She went upstairs, arm outstretched, as if she held soiled diapers. Ken and Lynn timer were gravitating toward the dining room, irresistibly drawn by the cooking roast's aroma. Miriam held out the chicken breast like a piece of evidence in a court of law. "Would anyone happen to know how this got in the dirty clothes bin?"

Ken's brow wrinkled in confusion. "What—is it?"

The chicken breast's appearance didn't seem to surprise Lynn timer. It seemed, in fact, to hold some unsettling significance. "Oh, no. . . ." she moaned, her tiny face falling. "It's got to be fresh. . . ." She turned and ran from the dining room.

Immediately Ken snapped, "What was *that* all about?" The front door slammed; Miriam yelled, "Lynn timer! Get back in here, please!" The "please" was added, not for the sake of politeness, but for emphasis.

Ken came and studied the dripping meat in his wife's hand. "You mean you found that in the basement clothes bin?"

Miriam looked at her husband in exasperation. "Very astute, Perry Mason. I think your colleagues are holding you back. You should be on the Supreme Court."

Something that had been smoldering in Ken's eyes flared, but Miriam didn't catch it. She was already on her way out the front door. Ken's fingers blindly found a chair's backrest and gripped it until the knuckled paled albino-white.



Outside, Linnie had mounted her bike and was pedaling down the drive, jarringly tilting from one training wheel to the other. Her feet clad only in socks, Miriam cursed as she ran across the unraked yard, prancing over gravel and autumn-fallen branches. Linnie was still a novice cyclist and couldn't get the momentum she needed. Miriam intercepted her as she curved out of the drive, jumping in front and latching onto the handle-bars. Linnie let her own hands fall away; her head was already bowed and her cheeks were wet with tears. A low keening reverberated in her throat.

"Young lady, just what is going on?" Miriam demanded.

The girl dragged a sleeve underneath her nose, unwittingly smearing snot down her cheek. "I . . . dunno. . . ."

"You don't know? Honey, what did you think you were doing? Did you think it would be funny, dropping left-overs down the laundry chute?"

Linnie seemed to take that as a suggestion and paused, weighing its worth. "Uh-huh." She nodded without looking up. "Thought it would be—a good joke." She picked at the fraying vinyl of the bike's seat between her legs. "You know. . . ."

"No, I don't know, Miss Lynette." Miriam reached out to grab Linnie's chin and make her look up, but she checked herself at the last moment. "Or maybe I *do* know all-too-well. I think that Bert Cooperman and his cronies are putting some nasty ideas into your head. And I'm not sure I like it anymore—"

At the accusation, Linnie finally brought her head up to face her mother. "Mom!" she wailed. "It's not Bert! You don't understand!" In frustration, she batted the multi-colored streamers trailing from the handles.

"Maybe I don't," Miriam admitted, "but I'll tell you one thing—"

Before she could elaborate any further, she was interrupted by a yell from the house. "Hey, Meer!" Ken was standing in the doorway. "Looks like the roast is starting to burn!"

Straightening up, Miriam uttered, "Well, for God's sake, you ass. . . ." Her voice was too low to carry to the house and she didn't seem to care that Linnie overheard. "Take the damn thing out!" She noticed with annoyance that he'd taken the time to fix himself a drink on the way out. She waved at him, then swung back to her daughter. "Listen: I want you to put that bike away,

get in the house, and eat your supper. After that, you're going straight to your room for the rest of the evening. And we're going to have a long talk about this."

Lynnie did as she was told. But after dinner, Ken pulled out a rented videotape he wanted to watch with Miriam, and even though she didn't feel like she wanted to be on speaking term with him, she found herself sitting and watching it, more from inertia than interest. Before long, the drinks start to flow and Lynnie was asleep before they wound their way upstairs, half-undressed, and Miriam never did ask her daughter why it—whatever 'it' was—had to be fresh.

\* \* \*

They were right at the door when the phone rang.

Miriam debated not picking it up, but then thought it might be Ken. If he had made changes in the evening's schedule, she wanted to know about them. Miriam shrugged and smiled at Lynnie. That alone was enough to make the girl fall apart with giggles; the two of them had been competing to see how silly each one could act all afternoon. It was Monday, and Miriam was going to drop Lynnie off at her friend Angie Pate's house while she went on to her women's club meeting.

Miriam swung the receiver between her shoulder and cheek. "Hello? Yes, Mrs. Sheldorf, how are you?" Looking at her daughter, Miriam circled her forefinger near her temple: azy-cray. Lynnie had to cover her mouth with both hands so the guffaws wouldn't carry over the phone. "Oh, we're fine here. Lynnie and I were just about to walk out the door." Mrs. Sheldorf was an elderly widow who lived about four houses down; she was well-known for both her obesity and her verbosity. Once started, she could spin a half-hour's tale into a day-long reminiscence.

"Oh, no, that's all right. Just tell me what you wanted. Yes, yes, I know your dachshund Helmut." *Because he's frequently over here pissing on my azaleas and crapping on my lawn!* she wanted to add. "Oh? For how long? Two days? Oh, I'm sorry, that's awful. No, I don't recall seeing him around. Sure, sure. I suppose Lynnie might have seen him. Let me ask her. Hold on a second."

Miriam cupped the receiver and turned to Lynnie. She was mildly shocked by Lynnie's unexpectedly pasty complexion. "Have you seen Mrs. Sheldorf's mutt around anywhere?" she asked.

Lynnie shook her head no.

"Mrs. Sheldorf, Lynnie says she hasn't seen your dog. Yes, 'kay. And I'll be sure to keep an eye out for him." Her tone was becoming strained, trying to cue Mrs. Sheldorf as to the urgency

of their errands. “No, I hadn’t heard about any other neighborhood pets turning up missing.” Miriam glanced toward where Lynn timer had been standing a second ago; the girl was gone. “Could be.—Could be.—Mrs. Sheldorf, I don’t think the likelihood of Satanic cults in our subdivision is very strong.—Sure, I’ll give you a call if he should happen to turn up.” Miriam knew that an invitation to come over for tea was next, but she threw out a hasty “Goodbye!” and cut the connection before the widow could say anything further.

At first, Miriam thought Lynn timer had left the living room. “Lynn timer?” she called tentatively. A barely-audible voice said, “Here. . . .” from the living room couch, shadowed for the most part by thick, dark drapes. Miriam walked over. “Hey, what’s up, sunshine?”

Lynn timer held her hands over her abdomen. “Don’t feel so good.”

Even in the dim light, Miriam could see her daughter’s face was chalky-white. “Are you going to throw up? Do you need a bucket?” *Great*, Miriam thought. *Here my little girl is ill, and I’m worried about stains on the upholstery and carpeting. Thanks for turning my values around, Ken.*

“I think I’ll be alright.”

“God, I hope you’re not coming down with something.” She probed her daughter’s stomach, held the back of her hand to her damp forehead. “You seemed fine just a moment ago.”

“I know. Then it got all—twisty and tummy-achy inside me.”

“Wonderful,” Miriam commented ruefully. “Do you still feel like going over to Angie’s?”

The giggles were gone; the earlier jovial atmosphere dissipated. Lynn timer shook her head, her eyes meandering between the telephone and the front door.

“Babe, I have to go to the club meeting. I don’t have any choice. I can’t get a sitter on this short notice, and I don’t want to leave you here alone when you’re feeling like this. Do you think you can come along with me, and read some books or comics quietly?”

In reply, Lynn timer reached up and hugged her mother tightly, possessively. Miriam was slightly taken aback, and it was some moments before she enveloped her daughter in return. *She’s still a child*, Miriam thought. *She’s still my baby.* And she felt an almost overpowering need to cry.

\* \* \*

The afternoon was, in most respects, uneventful; and yet, in other ways, it was one Miriam would long remember. Linnie, who, as a general rule, acted more mature than many of the Sullivans' adult acquaintances, had to be bribed with candy to let go of her mother's hand. She spent the entire meeting leaning against the back of Miriam's chair, moving her lips to the sparse dialogue in a "G. I. Joe" comic.

*This world, Miriam pondered, makes them so old while they're still so young. How do you raise them? How can I bring her up as a sane adult in an essentially insane world?* She had no answer, and when she brought up the concern informally among her friends after the business part of the meeting, Wendy Parrish merely said, "Love 'em, and pray for the best," and that was the end of that.

\* \* \*

*Wronger.*

Linnie's grasp of grammar was rudimentary, but even if she understood the concepts, she might still have used the word. It fit so well the wool-prickly feeling she had as she went up the walk after having been dropped off by the pre-school van.

And it was wronger, because things had been wrong for a long time now. There were many different wrongs, all piled up on top of each other like musty, forgotten blankets at the back of a linen closet. But Linnie only knew some of them.

None of this would have been so bad if she weren't so tired. But it wasn't just the lack of sleep that was beginning to tell upon her young form with smoke-rimmed eyes and gaunt cheeks. It was also the lies, the evasions. . . . Linnie felt she could go to sleep right now for the rest of the night, but she knew the most important work of the day hadn't even begun.

Walking up the front steps, coming closer to the wrongs, called up an unpleasant memory. Not long ago she had wanted to find a toy—a doll or tea set; even now, she wasn't sure. It was a toy that had been packed away and stored in one of the farthest corners of the basement. As she hunted for the right box, she accidentally tore through a cobweb-curtain. She remembered squirming back, spitting and then spitting even more as her tongue touched the spun filament. The strands, thin, filmy, and surprisingly strong, had clung to her hair and hands. It felt like that now, and it took a visible effort for her to merely open the door.

No pleasant background of mindless television soap greeted her, no backbeat from Mom's radio. No Mom either.

“Mom? Mommy?” Lynn timer threw her windbreaker and lunch box onto the couch. Doing so was against the rules, and she half-hoped her Mom would come around the corner, shaking her head and starting to shout, “How many times have I told you—”

“I’m home!” she added.

A quick look through the dining room and kitchen turned up no mother. No explanatory note either. She was about to head upstairs when she heard a wet, sucking sound from Daddy’s study.

Something close to a scream almost broke from her mouth. *Oh, no! It wasn’t satisfied! She hadn’t made it happy, and now it had—*

Her first impulse was to run away, simply leave and hope she found a new home. But then she had a startlingly adult revelation: It was better to turn and face an unknown fear than to let it fester and gnaw inside you for the rest of your life. Tremulously, she opened the study door and went in.

The study was on the side of the house away from the afternoon sun. It was dark-paneled and the blinds were only partially open, so Lynn timer could barely make out the silhouette of her mother. She was awkwardly perched on a stool at her Daddy’s bar, her head only inches from the counter. It wasn’t until Lynn timer was within two feet of Miriam that her mother noticed her.

“Lynn? Lynn timer?” Something was wrong with Mommy’s mouth; she couldn’t say her words right. “God, are you home from school already? Oh, Jesus. . . .” The word trailed into a senseless hiss as Miriam’s head sank back towards the bar like a deflating hot air balloon.

Lynn timer had seen caricatures of drunks in the cartoons and in her Daddy’s copy of *The New Yorker*. She knew what they were supposed to look like and never dreamed she would see her mother come so close to those pictures. She put a hand on her mother’s knee, then, fearing what might happen, drew it back.

“Mommy? Are you awright? Should I call a doctor?”

Miriam’s head wobbled upright, her cheeks clown-traced with mascara-tears. “Oh, honey . . . oh, baby . . . what am I gonna do . . . ?” She reached for her daughter’s head; her hand missed the mark and fell limply at her side. Lynn timer might have laughed if she hadn’t felt like crying a whole lot more.

“What happened, Mommy? What happened?” Lynn timer wanted to hold her mother, make it all better, but she didn’t even know how to begin.

Miriam kept mumbling as if she hadn’t heard. “I knew he had others on the side. I mean, I would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to know, right? But, like, I was always able to shut out the truth, deny that it was happening, talk myself out of it, say there were other explanations.” Miriam ran her fingers through her hair, making it stand up in sweaty spikes. “But now I’ve got, you know, proof. One of them has actually come to talk to me. So I can’t just shut it out anymore, pretend it’s not happening. I’ve got to face it.”

She paused long enough to slosh more drink into her glass and swallow most of it. She winced as the alcohol burned its way down.

“Who, Mommy? Who are you talking about?” Lynn timer almost wished for a sip of the amber liquid so she could join her mother in whatever distant, mystic trance held her.

“Ken, Ken, Ken. . . . What do I do with you now?”

With a start, Lynn timer recognized her Daddy’s name. It had never occurred to her that Mommy was referring to her father.

“Do I take Lynette and leave right away? Or do I wait until you come home and make up some half-baked excuses so I can laugh in your face?”

Lynn timer felt like a ghost, a tiny wisp of nothingness looking in on another world. She couldn’t stand it anymore; she reached up and tugged her mother’s blouse. “Mommy, please, come with me. I’m scared. I’m scared. . . .”

Miriam seemed to realize anew her daughter’s presence. Her eyes welled over with tears and drool ran from her lower lip. “Oh, my darling, I’m scared too. I’m so scared.” She reached for her daughter once more and this time roughly grasped the thin shoulder. “Honey, listen. I want you to get something to eat. Heat yourself up a microwave dinner or order a pizza. You know where the extra cash is.” Miriam seemed to swallow back something hot and acidic. “Then I want you to go upstairs and play in your room ’til bedtime. I know that doesn’t sound like much fun, but it’s just for tonight. You may hear Mommy and Daddy having a fight, but don’t listen to what we say, all right? And don’t let anyone in your room except me, ’kay? And that means even Daddy. Don’t let him come in unless I’m there with him. Understand?”

She wanted to understand, she really wanted to, but she just didn’t. “No, Mommy, please come with me—”

The change was instantaneous. One moment her Mommy was there; the next moment, she wasn't. "*Lynnie! Can it!*" Her lips were pulled back, the pupils of her eyes outlined with red traceries. "*Now do what I tell you!*"

Lynnie fell back against the wet bar, face averted and hands held out to ward off any blows. She couldn't say a word, had no breath even to scream.

Miriam sagged against the counter. "I'm sorry, Lynette. But you've got to do what Mommy tells you this time." A painful sob wracked her body.

Fighting down the shivers, Lynnie backed away from her mother's mollifying hand. "I will, Mommy. I will."

Another glassy clink came from the bar as Lynnie ran out of the study.

She went to the kitchen and, using a foot-stool, got into the freezer, all the while trying not to think about what was happening, and yet unable to keep her mind off it. She began to cry as she pulled out a "Budget Gourmet" dinner and set it cooking. While the microwave hummed, she poured a glass of milk and got out a fork and thought --

*Something's scared Mommy . . . something's frightened her. And Mommy's never been scared like this before. Oh, she's jumped at spooky movies, but she's never been so scared that she scared me. And it's not just anything that's scared her. This time it was Daddy. Daddy's done something really bad, really wrong.*

And even though her Mommy had yelled at her, her Mommy loved her and she loved Mommy. And no one made her Mommy scared like that and got away with it.

\* \* \*

For a moment, as she came awake, she was disoriented. Once, Mommy and Daddy had taken her to the movies. She thought it was going to be something, like a Disney cartoon, but it was only a bunch of grown-ups who never stopped talking, and they didn't even shoot at each other or anything. Eventually, she'd fallen asleep, then woke up near the rear, not knowing where she was. Even though they had been on either side of her, she'd screamed for her parents, startling everyone in the theater. Lynnie was able to hold back the scream this time, even though the room still revolved around her. The awakening sound rang in her ears like a lingering echo: a door slamming or a dresser drawer being shut violently.

In her dreams, everything was good: Linnie, Mommy, and Daddy lived in McDonaldland and they never had to go to work, or to school, or clean house. But now, awake, she remembered what had happened in the study, and what Mommy had said about Daddy. After dinner, she'd played in her room, just like she'd been told to do. Then she started getting tired. She hadn't heard Daddy come home. She'd climbed into bed and read until her dark eyes were too heavy to keep open any longer. Now it was late, and loud, angry voices were coming from down the hall.

Biting her lip, she tried to go back to sleep. But all the wrongs filled the air and sat on her chest like weights from Daddy's bar-bells. She told herself the voices were those of strangers, and that she didn't need to know what they had to say. But as much as she didn't want to, even more strongly was she compelled to listen.

Throwing the covers back, finding herself still in playclothes, she got out of bed and went to the door. She held Mr. Claws tightly under one arm; his thinning nap comforting to her hand. She eased the door open, making sure it didn't creak at the one-quarter mark like it would if you opened it too fast.

"—the bitch-the-bitch-the-bitch!" her father was shouting so fast it was almost unintelligible.

"Would you keep it down!" her mother snapped. "Linnie is sleeping two doors away, damn it!"

Linnie could virtually see her father whirl on her mother. "Don't tell me to keep it down!" But then his voice did drop, and Linnie couldn't make out what either of them was saying.

She peeked around the corner. A soft wash of light spilled into the hall from the far bedroom; otherwise, the house was dark. Suddenly, her room seemed too large, nearly cavernous, and she couldn't bear to stay inside it alone. On the other hand, she couldn't just walk in on her parents, not while they were fighting. She began creeping down the hall, thinking to herself --

*—I'm a cat, a little pussycat, and no one can hear me, and I don't make any noise—*

Once past the linen closet, she could again hear her parents' voices clearly.

"Look," Daddy was saying, "the little slut got knocked up and now she's desperate. She knows we've got money, so she's making a half-assed attempt to get some of it. But I didn't make her pregnant!"

Mom waited before replying. "So you're telling me you've never screwed her?"



Daddy waited even longer to answer than Mom had, but his next sentence came out all in a rush: “The one time I did ball her was so long ago that there’s no way I could have gotten her pregnant—”

There was an inarticulate sound—a swallowed scream, perhaps—and then a sharp smack: open palm against cheek.

“You bastard!” Lynn timer’s mother snarled. “You haven’t got a shred of decency in you! All along you’ve been thinking with your cock, and I’ve been letting you—”

“Hey, Meer, slow down, hold it.” Her father’s voice was strangely calm. “What do you want me to do? How can I make it up to you? How do I tell you I’m sorry and won’t do it again?”

*Let it be over*, Lynn timer prayed. Mom and Dad had argued before, lots of times, but never like this. Lynn timer didn’t know what they were fighting about—or rather, she had a vague suspicion, but that made it all the more worse. Her Daddy had done something really bad—maybe it was even a crime—and that made Lynn timer all the more upset for her mother’s sake.

Then some part of her mind pulled her away from the argument, away from her parents, and she thought, *It ought to be starting any minute now*.

“You can’t, Ken. This isn’t like sneaking into the cookie jar at midnight. I don’t think I’d believe anything you told me at this point.”

“Fine. Then I guess we have nothing more to discuss.”

“Nothing more to discuss?” Her mother said it as if she couldn’t believe her ears. “Ken, there is no way we’re done with this. One of us is leaving tonight, and I’ll be damned if it’s me.”

Daddy laughed, low and mocking. “Well, it’s sure not going to be me, sister. This is *my* home.” Then, calm and placating once more. “What are you getting so worked up about anyway? Do you think I’m an attorney for nothing? I can hush this matter up in fifteen minutes, and I intend to do just that, first thing tomorrow. No one has to know about it.”

“Ken, *I* know about it! That’s bad enough! Do you think I’m ever going to be able to trust you again? We can’t patch this up, not right now, not just like that.”

Lynn timer could hear it coming, the word she’d dreaded since she was old enough to understand its meaning. It was the word that made the neighborhood kids cry, even the toughest

bullies. And here, Mommy was going to say it, and Linnie hugged herself because she was afraid no one else would ever again.

“You’ll hear from my divorce lawyer in the morning.”

*No, no, no*, thought Linnie. *Don’t say it. Please. . . .*

Ken laughed again, more harshly than before. “Divorce lawyer? Hon, have you heard anything I’ve said in the past five minutes? I’m an attorney, for Christ’s sake. You’ll never win a divorce from me, let alone alimony, property, visiting rights.” He kept talking, even over Miriam’s unchecked crying. “Hell, you won’t even get Linnie. Let’s make up now and no one will ever know any of this happened.”

*Please, my god*, Linnie prayed, *let it be over now—*

And then the noise began.

\* \* \*

It was low and distant at first, barely audible, but it quickly built in volume, echoing through the entire house: a hundred soda cans crumpling at once, an aluminum sheet struck to produce the sound of thunder.

“What the hell is that?” Ken shouted, not entirely displeased with the interruption. Calming his wife down was nerve-wracking at any time, but now that she’d found out about Stacy. . . . He hoped he could make Miriam see reason, or at the very least, keep the matter from becoming known at the firm.

Leaving his wife with her face in her hands, he went into the hall. A shifting in the shadows at his side made him start. Recognizing his daughter, he demanded, “What are you doing out of bed?”

“The banging,” she said. “It woke me up.”

“Go back to your room,” he told her, wondering if she’d heard their angry confrontation. He didn’t wait to see that she obeyed, but went into the bathroom across the hall. It seemed to be the focus of the ear-numbing racket. Ken turned on the lights, momentarily at a loss as to what to do. The noise was growing disturbingly louder, making it harder to think.

“That doesn’t sound like the pipes, does it?”

Jumping a second time, Ken turned to see Miriam at his shoulder. She'd virtually shouted in his ear to be heard over the commotion. He was surprised she was even speaking to him after her scene. Her eyes were puffy and raw, but otherwise she looked strong and confident. Too much so for his tastes.

He shrugged in reply.

She leaned in close, but refrained from touching him. "Did you ever check out the laundry chute like I asked you?"

He shook his head in exasperation—there hadn't been any time; besides, the staining gunk hadn't reappeared. Miriam did have a point, however, in that the sound seemed to center within the chute. Ken knelt in front of the sink cabinet and opened the doors. The chute had been located under the sink to follow the path of the water pipes to the basement. He bent into the cavity and tried to peer into the opening. No good. Not enough light reached under the sink. The chute was the origin of the noise, though; Ken's head felt like a kettle drum. Groaning, he straightened, wondering what else could go wrong in one day.

"Gonna get my flashlight from the bedroom," he mouthed to Miriam.

As he left, Miriam got on her knees, curious about the deafening noise. Before she could get closer, a small hand pulled her back. It was Lynn, still awake, with a look of fear on her face. The girl shook her head, "No," but Miriam didn't understand. Then Ken was back, curtly motioning her out of the way.

Holding the flashlight in his left hand, Ken got under the sink and played the beam into the chute.

Looking down at her philandering husband's back, Miriam had an overwhelming urge to plant her heel in his rear. Instead, she called out, "See anything?"

"Nope." A pause as he fiddled with the light some more. "Wait a minute," he added, his voice tight. "Wasn't anything in the chute a second ago. Now I see—something down there. Looks like a fog—some sort of mist—coming up towards me."

"Does it smell like smoke? Is there a fire?"

Miriam squatted beside Ken to hear him better. Lynn stood at her side, her fists wrapped in her mother's blouse.

“Can’t tell what it is.” Readjusting himself, Ken pulled the flashlight back and stuck his right hand into the laundry chute. “Gonna try to—reach down into that stuff.”

Lynn timerugged at her mother, almost pulling her off-balance. Her face was full of worry. “Mom-mee!” She danced from foot to foot, as if she had to pee badly. “I changed my mind!”

Miriam hugged her daughter’s waist. “What was that, honey? What did you say?”

“I changed my mind! I don’t want Daddy to get hurt!” She dragged the blouse off one of Miriam’s shoulders. “Don’t let him do it!”

Squinting in concentration, oblivious to the exchange, Ken pushed his arm into the rectangular opening up to his shoulder. “Naw, can’t feel anything. Guess we’ll have to call a plumber, babe.” Ken’s eyes widened in surprise. “Wait a minute, I feel something down there.” And then his entire body torqued, twisting to the right as he tried to pull his arm out of the chute but couldn’t.

Lynn timerugged was saying something else to her mother, but Miriam couldn’t hear her. The room was filled, not only with the metallic hammer, but also Ken’s piercing cry: “*Jeezus! Jeezus, get it off of me! Get-it-off-a-me!*”

His mouth was a magnetic black hole into which Miriam feared she might be drawn. Ken had no words left, only one pure, shrill note of agony which rose, soprano-high and further still until she experienced his pain through his scream.

To Miriam, it seemed Ken had become a marionette, a puppet jerked by some unseen strings. His body began to heave up and down, his upper right arm rising out of the laundry chute and then slamming back into it. She knew there was no way he could be doing it to himself; something else was in the chute, holding on to her husband. Ken’s brow smacked the heavy fore-edge of the sink counter-top and blood sprinkled the tile floor and the peach throw rug. Ken’s free hand grasped at Miriam and, stunned, she pulled back away from him as she might from a leper, hugging the screaming Lynn timerugged to her chest.

Yet another sound joined the rhythmic pounding, the insane pleading, one low in register, stomach-seizing. It was the shred-tear of a juicy leg reluctantly pulled from the Thanksgiving turkey, the popcorn crunch of fingers bent back in a blindly-slammed car door. His remaining limbs flailing, Ken slid out from underneath the sink. His right shoulder now a spouting hydrant, he bathed the sink, the toilet, the tub in an obscene red shower. Like a massive landed catch, he

floundered randomly, autonomic systems kicking in as conscious control faded. Finally, his eyes rolled into his head and he stilled, encircled by an ever-widening scarlet pool.

Miriam felt as if something heavy and blunt had been driven into her solar plexus: she was unable to speak, cry, scream—couldn't even draw her breath. In her tremors, she shook Lynn timer like a ragdoll. Rocking, the girl turned and stared at the body. “*Dad-dad-daa-dee-ee-ee!*” Lynn timer couldn't keep up her keening wail; her voice caught in her throat chokingly and she had to gulp air as if she were drowning.

*The red! The red!* thought Miriam, watching the slow, inevitable advance of the pool's edge. She was unable to think of it as blood, couldn't even admit it was flowing from her husband's body. To do so would have forced her back that one step into the arms of darkness already reaching for her. The red was soaking into the throw-rug, staining it indelibly—*oh, that will never come out*—and now it was flowing steadily towards her, and all she knew was that she couldn't let it touch her, no matter what else happened, the red couldn't touch her. . . .

Without the threat posed by the blood, Miriam might have remained there all night, hunkered down wordlessly, transfixed by the slow ebb of her husband's life. But the red was almost at her toes, and if it touched her, she'd have to feel its wetness, its stickiness. Levering back against the bathroom wall, she rose without using her hands. Lynn timer's arms and legs, pipe-cleaner thin and clinging, circled her neck and waist. Miriam crouched like a world-class broad-jumper and propelled herself and Lynn timer over the puddle and into the hall.

As Miriam ran down the hall, Lynn timer was a shuddering, convulsive ball against her body, she didn't seem to notice that the deafening din from the chute had ceased.

\* \* \*

The downstairs lights were off and Miriam hadn't had the time to flick the switch at the top of the stairway. She caromed off walls and banister, bruising Lynn timer's knees and almost losing her footing. Lynn timer felt as if she were going through the “House of Horrors” at the summer carnival, quivering alone in a rickety car, waiting for the next garish, ugly scene to frighten her.

Miriam was still expecting another step when she hit the first floor; her right knee buckled and she almost dropped her daughter. Looking up as she found her balance, she saw, rising in front of her, a squat, misshapen form with a jumble of limbs and unnatural protuberances. She was cowering backwards, her screams reverberating in the empty living room, before she realized she was staring at her own shadowy reflection in the floor-length mirror on the wall across from the bottom of the stairs. Only marginally resisting an impulse to put her foot through the glass right then and there, she thought, *It's coming down first thing tomorrow.*

She rounded the corner into the kitchen, absently hitting the light switch with her elbow. The kitchen table was conveniently located underneath the wall phone, so she gracelessly dumped Linnie on its top. At first Linnie wouldn't let go, her small fists clinging to her mother's blouse. Miriam pulled at Linnie's hands until she let go, trying herself to remember exactly how the telephone worked. Linnie brought her knees up to her chest and locked her arms around them. Somewhere along the line she'd lost Mr. Claws and she desperately wanted to hold him.

"Hello—yes—Please, this is an emergency! Yes, please get someone here right away—" Miriam was shouting into the phone as if the wires alone weren't enough to carry her voice. Kicking her heels against the table, Linnie thought she was lucky to be able to stay up so late, especially on a week night. Any other day, Mommy and Daddy would be yelling at her. And where was Daddy? Funny, he should be in the kitchen here with her and Mommy. . . .

"It's my husband, he—he—Oh, God! *Don't you people want to know what happened?* Yes, yes . . . of course. My name is—" Miriam somehow got out her name, address, and phone number. "He's bleeding—he's dying. You've got to get here right away. It's his arm—his arm—"

Linnie's jaw cracked as she yawned. It was fun to stay up real late, but she felt sleepy now and wanted to go back to bed. It had been a long day, and a tiring one, even though she'd ignored her special chores. She'd stayed away from the pet stores and neighbor's lawns. She hadn't gone digging in the cool earth, hadn't gone hunting in the not-too-wild forest behind their house. It had been a relief, for one day anyway, not to have to find anything warm and still alive. . . . Now she wished she could go back and do things differently, though. Mommy might be able to do something about it, if only she could get Mommy to listen to her.

"Mommy . . . Mommy . . . Mom-mee. . . ." Linnie began to sing, moving her head in time to the tune. "Oh, Mommy, Mommy, Mom-mee. . . ."

Miriam put her palm over her free ear. "What? *What?* Just *get* them here! No, I won't hang up! You bitch! *Don't hang up on me! Dammit! You bitch!*"

Miriam slammed the receiver at the phone's hook and missed. She sank back against the refrigerator, slapping its smooth cream doors in frustration. "No, I cannot go back upstairs. I don't want to see him like that." She wasn't sure who she was talking to, but her own voice sounded calm, reassuring. She knelt beside the table, grasping Linnie's arms. "C'mon, honey, we're going outside to wait for the ambulance."

Although her eyes were wide open, Linnie didn't seem to be looking at anything. She was still chanting softly, "Mommy . . . Mommy . . . Mom-mee. . . ."

"What is it, baby?" Miriam stroked Linnie's hair, a mass of tangled knots. "What do you want to tell Mommy?"

Pursing her lips as if preparing to impart a very big secret, Linnie finally faced her mother and said, "I didn't feed it yet, Mommy. I didn't feed it today. . . ."

Miriam shook her head; the horror was too deep and she didn't have time to puzzle out the meaning of Linnie's words. She scooped her daughter off the table, soothed her, "It'll be okay, honey. It'll all be all right."

They stood together on the front stoop, hugged each other silently. The high whine of ambulance sirens began to rise and fall in the distance. Miriam had already let go of Ken. But, she decided, she would never stop holding Linnie, would never let her go.



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 1990, my family was living on North Carolina's Cape Fear coast. During one family vacation, we visited my parents, then living in Columbus, Ohio. Their home's upstairs master bathroom had a laundry chute, which I hadn't seen before in any of the other houses in which we'd previously lived. For some reason, it caught my attention and snagged my imagination. On the one hand, it was eminently practical. But on the other, it was like an open wound running through the very heart of the house.

*What if, I thought, that chute—that wound—could serve as a symbol of other, much more damaging problems in the heart of a typical American family?*

When *The Chute* was first picked up for publication by editor George Hatch, it was initially intended to serve as the inaugural entry in a series of single-author dark fantasy chapbooks. I believe financial considerations forced George to rethink that plan, and the novella was published in the anthology *Guignoir and Other Furies* (1991). (George had been publishing the horror zine *Noctulpa*, and *Guignoir* was essentially *Noctulpa* #5.)

I am extremely grateful to Element 118 Books for publishing *The Chute* in a stand-alone format, the way it was originally intended to be presented to the world.