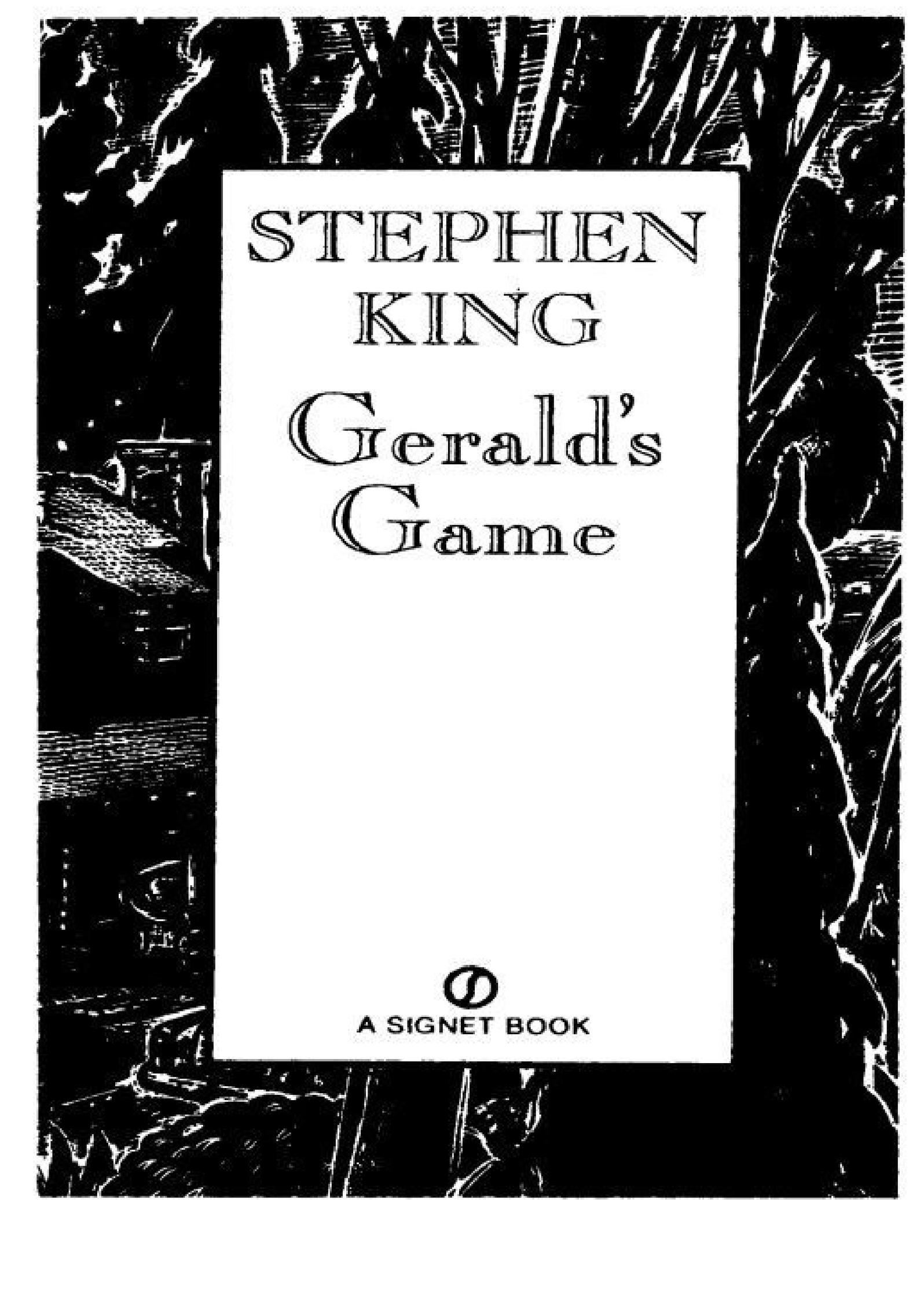


STEPHEN
KING

Gerald's
Game



A SIGNET BOOK



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A Different Kind of Bedtime Story ...

GERALD'S GAME

On a warm weekday in October, in the lovely summer home of Gerald and Jessie Burlingame, a game is about to begin. It's a game to be played between husband and wife, and a game that has Jessie being innocently handcuffed to the bedposts. Then, in one horrible, violent act, Gerald is dead and Jessie—well, she's alone and still chained to the bed.

But Jessie's about to have company that goes beyond all of her worst nightmares.

**“Stunning ... hairy ... I was
scared to death ... but I read on
avidly.... I had to know
what would happen.”**

—*Cosmopolitan*

STEPHEN KING

FOUR PAST MIDNIGHT

“Chilling.”

—*Milwaukee Journal*

GERALD’S GAME

“Terrific.”

—*USA Today*

IT

“Mesmerizing.”

—*Washington Post Book World*

MISERY

“Wonderful.”

—*Houston Chronicle*

NEEDFUL THINGS

“Demonic”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

NIGHT SHIFT

“Macabre.”

—*Dallas Times-Herald*

PET SEMATARY

“Unrelenting.”

—*Pittsburgh Press*

‘SALEM’S LOT

“Tremendous.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

THE SHINING

“Spellbinding.”

—*Pittsburgh Press*

SKELETON CREW

“Diabolical.”

—*Associated Press*

THE STAND

“Great”

—*New York Times Book Review*

THINNER

“Extraordinary.”

—*Booklist*

THE TOMMYKNOCKERS

“Marvelous.”
—*Boston Globe*

WORKS BY STEPHEN KING

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Carrie
'Salem's Lot
The Shining
The Stand
The Dead Zone
Firestarter
Cujo
THE DARK TOWER I:
The Gunslinger
Christine
Pet Sematary
Cycle of the Werewolf
The Talisman
(with Peter Straub)
It
The Eyes of the Dragon
Misery
The Tommyknockers
THE DARK TOWER II:
*The Drawing
of the Three*
THE DARK TOWER III:
The Waste Lands
The Dark Half
Needful Things
Gerald's Game
Dolores Claiborne
Insomnia
Rose Madder
Desperation
The Green Mile
THE DARK TOWER IV:
Wizard and Glass
Bag of Bones
Hearts in Atlantis
The Girl Who Loved Tom

Gordon
Dreamcatcher
Black House
(with Peter Straub)
From a Buick 8

AS RICHARD RACHMAN

The Long Walk

Roadwork

The Running Man

Thinner

The Regulators

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Night Shift

Different Seasons

Skeleton Crew

Four Past Midnight

Nightmares and

Dreamscapes

Everything's Eventual

NONFICTION

Danse Macabre

On Writing

SCREENPLAYS

Creepshow

Cat's Eye

Silver Bullet

Maximum Overdrive

Pet Sematary

Golden Years

Sleepwalkers

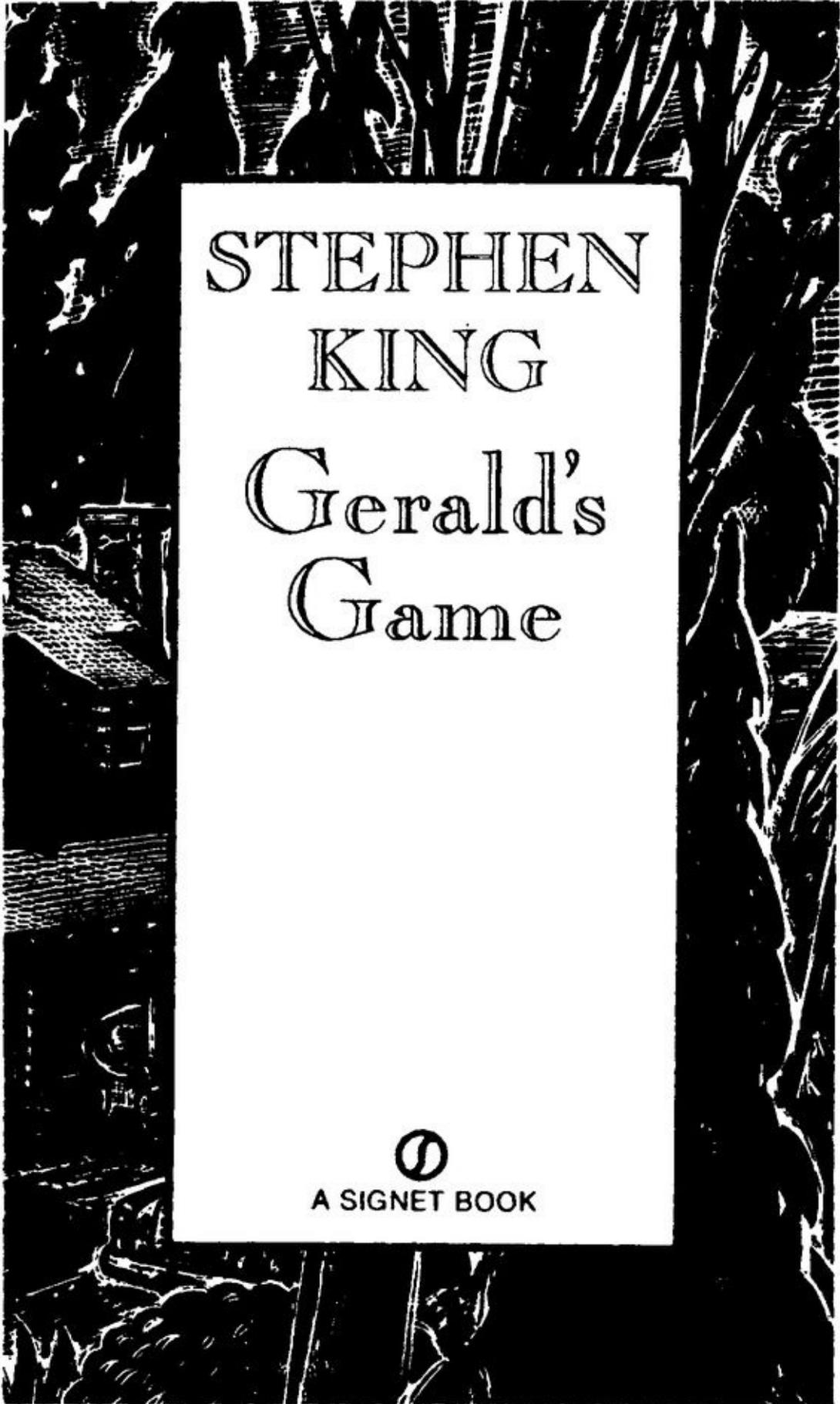
The Stand

The Shining

Rose Red

Storm of the Century





STEPHEN
KING

Gerald's
Game



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SIGNET

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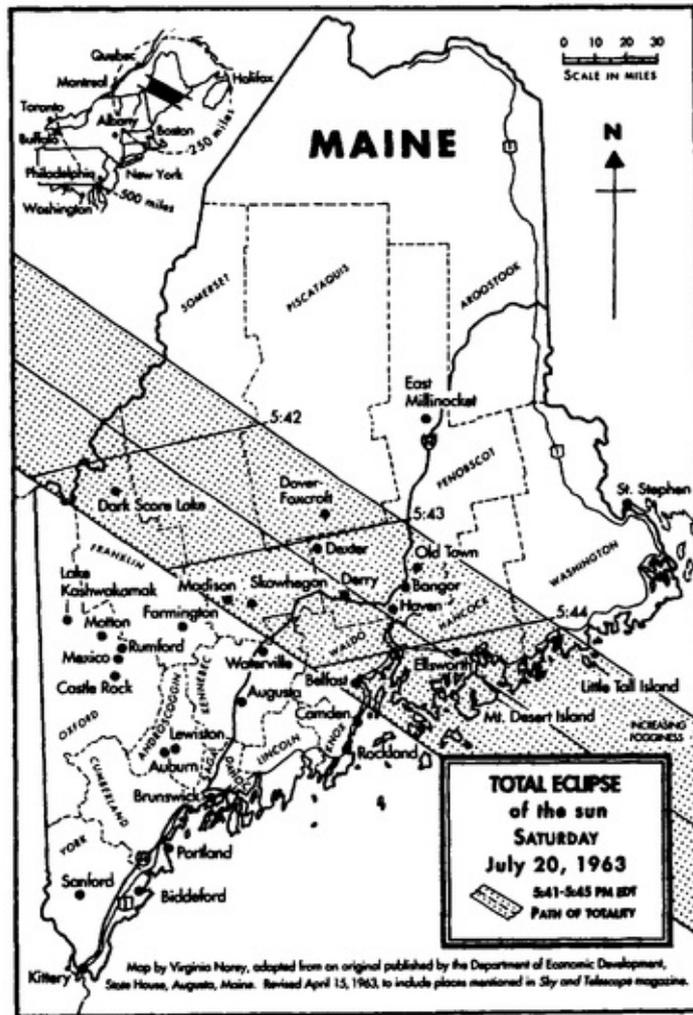
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*This book is dedicated,
with love and admiration,
to six good women:*

Margaret Spruce Morehouse
Catherine Spruce Graves
Stephanie Spruce Leonard
Anne Spruce Labree
Tabitba Spruce King
Marcella Spruce

[Sadie] gathered herself together. No one could describe the scorn of her expression or the contemptuous hatred she put into her answer. “You men! You filthy dirty pigs! You’re all the same, all of you. Pigs! Pigs!”

—*W. Somerset Maugham,*
“Rain”



**TOTAL ECLIPSE
of the sun
SATURDAY
July 20, 1963**



Jessie could hear the back door banging lightly, randomly, in the October breeze blowing around the house. The jamb always swelled in the fall and you really had to give the door a yank to shut it. The time they had forgotten. She thought of telling Gerald to go back and shut the door before they got too involved or that banging would drive her nuts. Then she thought how ridiculous that would be, given the current circumstances. It would ruin the whole mood.

What mood?

A good question, that. And as Gerald turned the hollow barrel of the key in the second lock, as she heard the minute click from above her left ear, she realized that, for her at least, the mood wasn't worth preserving. That was why she had noted the unlatched door in the first place, of course. For her the sexual turn-on of the bondage games hadn't lasted long.

The same could not be said of Gerald, however. He was wearing only a pair of Jockey shorts now and she didn't have to look as high as his face to see that his interest continued unabated.

This is stupid, she thought, but stupid wasn't the whole story, either. It was also a little scary. She didn't like to admit it, but there it was.

"Gerald, why don't we just forget this?"

He hesitated for a moment, frowning a little, then went on across the room to the dresser which stood to the left of the bathroom door. His face cleared as he went. She watched him from where she lay on the bed, her arms raised and splayed out, making her look a little like Fay Wray chained up and waiting for the great ape in *King Kong*. Her wrists had been secured to the mahogany bedposts with two sets of handcuffs. The chains gave each hand about six inches' worth of movement. Not much.

He put the keys on top of the dresser—two minute clicks, her ears seemed in exceptionally fine working order for a Wednesday afternoon—and then turned back to her. Over his head, sunripples from the lake danced and wavered on the bedroom's high white ceiling.

"What do you say? This has lost a lot of its charm for me." *And it never had that much to begin with*, she did not add.

He grinned. He had a heavy, pink-skinned face below a narrow widow's peak of hair as black as a crow's wing, and that grin of his had always done something to her that she didn't much care for. She couldn't quite put her finger on what that something was, but—

Oh, sure you can. It makes him look stupid. You can practically see his IQ going down ten points for every inch that grin spreads. At its maximum width, your killer corporate lawyer of a husband looks like a janitor on work-release from the local mental institution.

That was cruel, but not entirely inaccurate. But how did you tell your husband of almost twenty

years that every time he grinned he looked as if he were suffering from light mental retardation? The answer was simple, of course: you didn't. His smile was a different matter entirely. He had a love smile—she guessed it was that smile, so warm and good-humored, which had persuaded her to go on with him in the first place. It had reminded her of her father's smile when he told his family amusing things about his day as he sipped a before-dinner gin and tonic.

This wasn't the smile, though. This was the *grin*—a version of it he seemed to save just for the sessions. She had an idea that to Gerald, who was on the inside of it, the grin felt wolfish. Piratical, maybe. From her angle, however, lying here with her arms raised above her head and nothing on but a pair of bikini panties, it only looked stupid. No ... *retarded*. He was, after all, no devil-may-care adventurer like the ones in the men's magazines over which he had spent the furious ejaculations of his lonely, overweight puberty; he was an attorney with a pink, too-large face spreading below a widow's peak which was narrowing relentlessly toward total baldness. Just an attorney with a hard-core poking the front of his undershorts out of shape. And only moderately out of shape, at that.

The size of his erection wasn't the important thing, though. The important thing was the grin. It hadn't changed a bit, and that meant Gerald hadn't taken her seriously. She was *supposed* to protest after all, that was the game.

"Gerald? I mean it."

The grin widened. A few more of his small, inoffensive attorney's teeth came into view; his IED tumbled another twenty or thirty points. And he still wasn't hearing her.

Are you sure of that?

She was. She couldn't read him like a book—she supposed it took a lot more than seventeen years of marriage to get to that point—but she thought she usually had a pretty good idea of what was going through his head. She thought something would be seriously out of whack if she didn't.

If that's the truth, toots, how come he can't read you? How come he can't see this isn't just a new scene in the same old sex-farce?

Now it was her turn to frown slightly. She had always heard voices inside her head—she guessed everyone did, although people usually didn't talk about them, any more than they talked about their bowel functions—and most of them were old friends, as comfortable as bedroom slippers. This one, however, was new ... and there was nothing comfortable about it. It was a strong voice, one that sounded young and vigorous. It also sounded impatient. Now it spoke again, answering its own question.

It isn't that he can't read you; it's just that sometimes, toots, he doesn't want to.

"Gerald, really—I don't feel like it. Bring the keys back and unlock me. We'll do something else. I'll get on top, if you want. Or you can just lie there with your hands behind your head and I'll do you, you know, the other way."

Are you sure you want to do that? the new voice asked. Are you really sure you want to have any sex with this man?

Jessie closed her eyes, as if she could make the voice shut up by doing that. When she opened them again, Gerald was standing at the foot of the bed, the front of his shorts jutting like the prow of a ship. Well ... some kid's toy boat, maybe. His grin had widened further, exposing the last few teeth—the ones with the gold Sitings—on both sides. She didn't just dislike that dumb grin, she realized; she despised it.

"I *will* let you up ... if you're very, very good. Can you be very, very good, Jessie?"

Corny, the new no-bullshit voice commented. *Très corny*.

He hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his underpants like some absurd gunslinger. The

Jockeys went down pretty fast once they got past his not inconsiderable love handles. And there it was exposed. ~~Not the formidable engine of love she had first encountered as a teenager in the pages *Fanny Hill* but something meek and pink and circumcised; five inches of completely unremarkable erection.~~ Two or three years ago, on one of her infrequent trips to Boston, she had seen a movie called *The Belly of an Architect*. She thought, *Right. And now I'm looking at The Penis of an Attorney*. She had to bite the insides of her cheeks to keep from laughing. Laughing at this point would be impolitic.

An idea came to her then, and it killed any urge she'd had to laugh. It was this: he didn't know she was serious because for him, Jessie Mahout Burlingame, wife of Gerald, sister of Maddy and Willy's daughter of Tom and Sally, mother of no one, was really not here at all. She had ceased to be here when the keys made their small, steely clicks in the locks of the handcuffs. The men's adventure magazines of Gerald's teenage years had been replaced by a pile of skin magazines in the bottom drawer of his desk, magazines in which women wearing pearls and nothing else knelt on bearskin rugs while men with sexual equipment that made Gerald's look strictly HOSCALE by comparison took them from behind. In the backs of these magazines, between the talk-dirty-to-me phone ads with the 900 numbers, were ads for inflatable women which were supposed to be anatomically correct—a bizarre concept if Jessie had ever encountered one. She thought of those air-filled dollies now, the pink skins, lineless cartoon bodies, and featureless faces, with a kind of revelatory amazement. It wasn't horror—not quite—but an intense light flashed on inside her, and the landscape it disclosed was certainly more frightening than this stupid game, or the fact that this time they were playing it in the summer house by the lake long after summer had run away for another year.

But none of it had affected her hearing in the slightest. Now it was a chainsaw she heard, snarling away in the woods at some considerable distance—as much as five miles, maybe. Closer by, out on the main body of Kashwakamak Lake, a loon tardy in starting its annual run south lifted its crazed cry into the blue October air. Closer still, somewhere here on the north shore, a dog barked. It was an ugly ratcheting sound, but Jessie found it oddly comforting. It meant that someone else was up here on midweek in October or no. Otherwise there was just the sound of the door, loose as an old tooth in rotted gum, slapping at the swollen jamb. She felt that if she had to listen to that for long, it would drive her crazy.

Gerald, now naked save for his spectacles, knelt on the bed and began crawling up toward her. His eyes were still gleaming.

She had an idea it was that gleam which had kept her playing the game long after her initial curiosity had been satisfied. It had been years since she'd seen that much heat in Gerald's gaze when he looked at her. She wasn't bad-looking—she'd managed to keep the weight off, and still had most of her figure—but Gerald's interest in her had waned just the same. She had an idea that the booze was partly to blame for that—he drank a hell of a lot more now than when they'd first been married—but she knew the booze wasn't all of it. What was the old saw about familiarity breeding contempt? That wasn't supposed to hold true for men and women in love, at least according to the Romantic poets she'd read in English Lit 101, but in the years since college she had discovered there were certain facts of life about which John Keats and Percy Shelley had never written. But of course, they had both died a lot younger than she and Gerald were now.

And all of that didn't matter much right here and right now. What maybe did was that she had gone on with the game longer than she had really wanted to because she had liked that hot little gleam in Gerald's eyes. It made her feel young and pretty and desirable. But ...

... but if you really thought it was you he was seeing when he got that look in his eye, you were misled, toots. Or maybe you misled yourself. And maybe now you have to decide—really, really decide

—if you intend to continue putting up with this humiliation. Because isn't that pretty much how you feel? Humiliated?

She sighed. Yes. It pretty much was.

"Gerald, I do mean it." She spoke louder now, and for the first time the gleam in his eyes flickered a little. Good. He could hear her after all, it seemed. So maybe things were still okay. Not great, it had been a long time since things had been what you could call great, but okay. Then the gleam reappeared, and a moment later the idiot grin followed.

"I'll teach you, me proud beauty," he said. He actually *said* that, *pronouncing beauty* the way the landlord in a bad Victorian melodrama might say it.

Let him do it, then. Just let him do it and it will be done.

This was a voice she was much more familiar with, and she intended to follow its advice. She didn't know if Gloria Steinem would approve and didn't care; the advice had the attractiveness of the completely practical. Let him do it and it would be done. Q.E.D.

Then his hand—his soft, short-fingered hand, its flesh as pink as that which capped his penis—reached out and grasped her breast, and something inside her suddenly popped like an overstrained tendon. She bucked her hips and back sharply upward, flinging his hand off.

"Quit it, Gerald. Unlock these stupid handcuffs and let me up. This stopped being fun around late March, while there was still snow on the ground. I don't feel sexy; I feel ridiculous."

This time he heard her all the way down. She could see it in the way the gleam in his eyes went out all at once, like candleflames in a strong gust of wind. She guessed that the two words which had finally gotten through to him were *stupid and ridiculous*. He had been a fat kid with thick glasses, a kid who hadn't had a date until he was eighteen—the year after he went on a strict diet and began to work out in an effort to strangle the engirdling flab before it could strangle him. By the time he was a sophomore in college, Gerald's life was what he described as "more or less under control" (as if life—his life, anyway—were a bucking bronco he had been ordered to tame), but she knew his high school years had been a horror show that had left him with a deep legacy of contempt for himself and a suspicion of others.

His success as a corporate lawyer (and marriage to her; she believed that had also played a part, perhaps even the crucial one) had further restored his confidence and self-respect, but she supposed that some nightmares never completely ended. In a deep part of his mind, the bullies were still giving Gerald wedgies in study-hall, still laughing at Gerald's inability to do anything but girlie-pushups. She was physically fit, and there were words—*stupid* and *ridiculous*, for instance—that brought all that back as if high school had been yesterday ... or so she suspected. Psychologists could be incredibly stupid about many things, almost willfully stupid, it often seemed to her, but about the horrible persistence of some memories she thought they were bang-on. Some memories batted onto a person's mind like evil leeches, and certain words—*stupid* and *ridiculous*, for example—could bring them instantly back to a squirming, feverish life.

She waited to feel a pang of shame at hitting below the belt like this and was pleased—or maybe it was relief she felt—when no pang came. *I guess maybe I'm just tired of pretending*, she thought, and this idea led to another: she might have her own sexual agenda, and if she did, this business with the handcuffs was definitely not on it. They made her feel demeaned. The whole idea made her feel demeaned. Oh, a certain uneasy excitement had accompanied the first few experiments—the ones with the scarves—and on a couple of occasions she'd had multiple orgasms, and that was a rarity for her. All the same, there had been side-effects she didn't care for, and that feeling of being somehow demeaned was only one of them. She'd had her own nightmares following each of those early versions.

of Gerald's game. She awoke from them sweaty and gasping, her hands thrust deeply into the fork of her crotch and rolled into tight little balls. She only remembered one of these dreams, and the memory was distant, blurred: she had been playing croquet without any clothes on, and all at once the sun had gone out.

Never mind all that, Jessie; those are things you can consider another day. Right now the only important thing is getting him to let you loose.

Yes. Because this wasn't their game; this game was all his. She had gone on playing it simply because Gerald wanted her to. And that was no longer good enough.

The loon voiced its lonely cry out on the lake again. Gerald's dopey grin of anticipation had been replaced by a look of sulky displeasure. *You broke my toy, you bitch*, that look said.

Jessie found herself remembering the last time she'd gotten a good look at that expression. August Gerald had come to her with a glossy brochure, had pointed out what he wanted, and she had said yes, of course he could buy a Porsche if he wanted a Porsche, they could certainly afford a Porsche, but she thought he might do better to buy a membership in the Forest Avenue Health Club, and he had been threatening to do for the past two years. "You don't have a Porsche body just now," she had said, knowing she wasn't being very diplomatic but feeling that this really wasn't the time for diplomacy. Also, he had exasperated her to the point where she hadn't cared a whole hell of a lot for his feelings. This had been happening more and more frequently to her lately, and it dismayed her, but she didn't know what to do about it.

"Just what is that supposed to mean?" he had asked stiffly. She didn't bother to answer; she had learned that when Gerald asked such questions, they were almost always rhetorical. The important message lay in the simple subtext: *You're upsetting me, Jessie. You're not playing the game.*

But on that occasion—perhaps in an unknowing tune-up for this one—she had elected to ignore the subtext and answer the question.

"It means that you're still going to be forty-six this winter whether you own a Porsche or not, Gerald ... and you're still going to be thirty pounds overweight." Cruel, yes, but she could have been downright gratuitous; could have passed on the image which had flashed before her eyes when she had looked at the photograph of the sports car on the front of the glossy brochure Gerald had handed her. In that blink of an instant she had seen a chubby little kid with a pink face and a widow's peak stuck in the innertube he'd brought to the old swimming hole.

Gerald had snatched the brochure out of her hand and had stalked away without another word. The subject of the Porsche had not been raised since ... but she had often seen it in his resentful We Are Not Amused stare.

She was seeing an even hotter version of that stare right now.

"You said it sounded like *fun*. Those were your exact words: 'It sounds like fun.' "

Had she said that? She supposed she had. But it had been a mistake. A little goof, that was all, a little slip on the old banana peel. Sure. But how did you tell your husband that when he had his lower lip pooched out like Baby Huey getting ready to do a tantrum?

She didn't know, so she dropped her gaze ... and saw something she didn't like at all. Gerald's version of Mr. Happy hadn't wilted a bit. Apparently Mr. Happy hadn't heard about the change of plans.

"Gerald, I just don't—"

"—feel like it? Well, that's a hell of a note, isn't it? I took the whole day off work. And if we spend the night, that means tomorrow morning off, as well." He brooded over this for a moment, and then repeated: "You said it sounded like fun."

She began to fan out her excuses like a tired old poker-hand (*Yes, but now I have a headache; Yes, but I'm having these really shitty pre-menstrual cramps; Yes, but I'm a woman and therefore entitled to change my mind; Yes, but now that we're actually out here in the Big Lonely you frighten me, you bad beautiful brute of a man, you*), the lies that fed either his misconceptions or his ego (the two were frequently interchangeable), but before she could pick a card, any card, the new voice spoke up. It was the first time it had spoken out loud, and Jessie was fascinated to find that it sounded the same in the air as it did inside her head: strong, dry, decisive, in control.

It also sounded curiously familiar.

"You're right—I guess I *did* say that, but what really sounded like fun was breaking away with you the way we used to before you got your name up on the door with the rest of the type-A's. I thought maybe we could bounce the bedsprings a little, then sit on the deck and dig the quiet. Maybe play some Scrabble after the sun went down. Is that an actionable offense, Gerald? What do you think? Tell me, because I really want to know."

"But you said—"

For the last five minutes she had been telling him in various ways that she wanted out of the goddam handcuffs, and he still hadn't let her out of them. Her impatience boiled over into fury. "My God, Gerald, this stopped being fun for me almost as soon as we started, and if you weren't as thick as a brick, you would have realized it!"

"Your mouth. Your smart, sarcastic mouth. Sometimes I get so tired of—"

"Gerald, when you get your head really set on something, sweet and low doesn't come close to reaching you. And whose fault is that?"

"I don't like you when you're like this, Jessie. When you're like this I don't like you a bit."

This was going from bad to worse to horrible, and the scariest part was how fast it was happening. Suddenly she felt very tired, and a line from an old Paul Simon song occurred to her: "I don't want no part of this crazy love." Right on, Paul. You may be short, but you ain't dumb.

"I know you don't. And it's okay that you don't, because right now the subject is these handcuffs, not how much you do or don't like me when I tell you I've changed my mind about something. I want out of these cuffs. Are you hearing me?"

No, she realized with dawning dismay. He really wasn't. Gerald was still one turn back.

"You are just so goddamned *inconsistent*, so goddamned *sarcastic*. I love you, Jess, but I hate that goddam lip on you. I always have." He wiped the palm of his left hand across his pouting rosebud of a mouth and then looked sadly at her—poor, put-upon Gerald, saddled with a woman who had gotten him out here in the forest primeval and then reneged on her sexual obligations. Poor, put-upon Gerald who showed no sign whatever of getting the handcuff keys off the bureau by the bathroom door.

Her unease had changed into something else—while her back was turned, as it were. It had become a mixture of anger and fear she could remember feeling only once before. When she was twelve or so her brother Will had goosed her at a birthday party. All her friends had seen, and they had all laughed. *Har-har, preety fonny, senhorra, I theenk*. It hadn't been funny to her, though.

Will had been laughing hardest of all, so hard he was actually doubled over with one hand planted above each knee, his hair hanging in his face. This had been a year or so after the advent of the Beatles and the Stones and the Searchers and all the rest, and Will had had a lot of hair to hang. It had apparently blocked his view of Jessie, because he had no idea of how angry she was

... and he was, under ordinary circumstances, very much aware of her turns of mood and temper. He'd gone on laughing until that froth of emotion so filled her that she understood she would have to do something with it or simply explode. So she had doubled up one small fist and had punched him

well-loved brother in the mouth when he finally raised his head to look at her. The blow had knocked him over like a bowling pin and he had cried really hard.

Later she had tried to tell herself that he had cried more out of surprise than pain, but she had known, even at twelve, that that wasn't so. She had hurt him, hurt him plenty. His lower lip had split in one place, his upper lip in two, and she had hurt him plenty. And why? Because he had done something stupid? But he'd only been nine himself—nine that day—and at that age *all* kids were stupid. No; it hadn't been his stupidity. It had been her fear—fear that if she didn't do something with that ugly green froth of anger and embarrassment, it would (*put out the sun*)

cause her to explode. The truth, first encountered on that day, was this: there was a well inside her and the water in that well was poisoned, and when he goosed her, William had sent a bucket down there, one which had come up filled with scum and squirming gluck. She had hated him for that, and she supposed it was really her hate which had caused her to strike out. That deep stuff had scared her. Now, all these years later, she was discovering it still did ... but it still infuriated her, as well.

You won't put out the sun, she thought, without the slightest idea of what this meant. *Be damned, you will.*

"I don't want to argue the fine points, Gerald. Just get the keys to these fucking things and *unlock me!*"

And then he said something which so astounded her that at first she couldn't grasp it: "What if I *won't?*"

What registered first was the change in his tone. He usually spoke in a bluff, gruff, hearty sort of voice—*I'm in charge here, and it's a pretty lucky thing for all of us,*

isn't it? that tone proclaimed—but this was a low, purring voice with which she was not familiar. The gleam had returned to his eyes—that hot little gleam which had turned her on like a bank of floodlights once upon a time. She couldn't see it very well—his eyes were squinted down to puffy slits behind his gold-rimmed spectacles—but it was there. Yes indeed.

Then there was the strange case of Mr. Happy. Mr. Happy hadn't wilted a bit. Seemed, in fact, to be standing taller than at any time she could remember ... although that was probably just her imagination.

Do you think so, toots? I don't.

She processed all this information before finally returning to the last thing he'd said—that amazing question. *What if I won't?* This time she got past the tone to the sense of the words, and as she came fully understand them, she felt her rage and fear crank up a notch. Somewhere inside, that bucket was going down its shaft again for another slimy dip—a scumload of water filled with microbes almost as poisonous as swamp copperheads.

The kitchen door banged against its jamb and the dog began to bark in the woods again, sounding closer than ever now. It was a splintery, desperate sound. Listening to something like that for too long would undoubtedly give you a migraine.

"Listen, Gerald," she heard her strong new voice saying. She was aware that this voice could have picked a better time to break its silence—she was, after all, out here on the deserted north shore of Kashwakamak Lake, handcuffed to the bedposts, and wearing only a skimpy pair of nylon panties—but she still found herself admiring it. Almost against her will she found herself admiring it. "Are you listening yet? I know you don't do much of that these days when it's me doing the talking, but this time it's really important that you hear me. So ... are you finally listening?"

He was kneeling on the bed, looking at her as if she were some previously undiscovered species of bug. His cheeks, in which complex networks of tiny scarlet threads squirmed (she thought of them

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