RéSUMÉ WITH MONSTERS

WILLIAM BROWNING SPENCER
Resume with monsters

William Browning Spencer
part one

the estranged lovers
Ralph’s One-Day Résumés was located in an industrial park that also housed insurance salesmen, auto mechanics, computer repairmen and a karate school. Philip Kenan accelerated to make the left into the parking lot, then braked hard to avoid losing his muffler on the huge speed bump that must have been a legend amid the local hordes of fire ants.

Philip parked, unbuckled the seat belt, exhaled. Work. It could be worse. It had been. This was safe harbor. So far, he had seen no signs of Cthulhu or Yog-Sothoth or his dread messenger, Nyarlathotep.

Philip waved to the receptionist, a pretty blond girl who was talking on the phone. He walked quickly down the hall and into the bathroom which, while cryptlike and dank, contained no hideous, disorienting graffiti from mad Alhazred's Necronomicon.

It was five in the evening, time for a middle-aged, lovesick, failed-novelist and near-obsolete typesetter to get to work. He just needed a minute to collect himself, to splash some water in his face, to check for nosebleeds, see that his eyes were in their sockets, see that no lichen grew on his forehead, that sort of thing. All was in order. Sane as rain.

He smiled at himself, a pathetic attempt at self-affirmation. I will win Amelia back, he thought. We will put the bad times behind us.

He left the bathroom and walked on down the hall and into the break room where he punched his card in the time clock. The machine's worn ribbon produced a mark so faint that it could only be read by the ancient—and perhaps psychic—Mrs. Figge in payroll. Philip had actually seen her read the time cards by pressing them fiercely against her forehead and closing her eyes.

Philip left the break room and entered the long production room where the usual frenzy prevailed. A paste-up artist was sobbing while a secretary shrieked on one of the phone lines. A new printer, hired the previous week, was complaining that he had not been given a chance. Passing employees nodded their heads in perfunctory commiseration. The hard truth was, you had to fire a printer every now and then. Anyone in the business knew that long-term employment robbed a printer of his edge, and dispatching a printer invigorated those of his trade who remained.

The boss, an extremely thin, sharp-faced man named Ralph Pederson, rushed down an aisle where graphic artists labored over light tables and typesetters hunched over drab-green terminals. "Are you almost done? Finished? How's it going? An hour? What happened here? Shouldn't this be done?" He seemed, as always, to be in great pain, tortured by the money-consuming slowness that surrounded him. He waved at Philip and moved on.
Philip sat down at the terminal next to Monica, a stout, middle-aged woman with short-cropped brown hair who was the fastest typesetter in the whole world, perhaps, and who vibrated as she worked, her small feet bouncing on the dirty linoleum floor. Like all typesetters, she talked to herself in a loud, hearty voice. "If that's Avant Garde I'm a poodle!" she would exclaim. Or, "By golly, this isn't on file. I don't care what they say!"

Monica turned to Philip. "I had to set all that stuff you left last night. I've got my own work, you know. Let's get with the program, okay. We are production here, not design. This isn't some high fashion magazine where you can lay back in a barcalounger, sip some wine, and gossip about editors. This is slap-it down, out-the-door production, like it or leave it." Philip promised to improve. "You just got to get that speed up," Monica said. "I know you have only been here a couple of weeks; I understand that, but you gotta be aware, you know."

Monica and the rest of the production staff left an hour after Philip's arrival. He had the room to himself.

He grabbed another handful of business card orders and began to type.

Much of what he typed was banal. For some reason, hordes of old men wished to have business cards announcing that they were retired. No Job No Money No Worries these cards would announce. The purpose of such a business card was unclear. It was, however, a popular item, as were cards reading: Hi, I haven't even met you but I've fallen in love with you and I am heartbroken because I don't even know your

Name:
Address:

The recipient of such a card was supposed to write her name and address on it.

Philip tried to imagine a woman being charmed by such a card, but the best Philip could do was conjure up a vision of a hardened hooker smiling gamely and saying, "That's funny. That's really funny."

And sometimes, amid the banality and insufferable self-advertisements, there were true and decent aspirations.

Résumés of the young, narrating honors seminars and obscure college awards and summer jobs, full of fine sentiments (I wish to be of service to other humans and to work toward a cleaner and more healthful environment) could bring a sudden hollow stillness to Philip's heart, as though a loved one had just fled his embrace, and Philip would hear himself whisper, "Be careful."

At ten, Philip called Amelia up from the phone in Mrs. Figge's office.

"It's me," he said.
"I know that," Amelia said. Her voice still set his heart racing. It was such a wonderful, bell-like voice, although these days it contained a certain wary edge.

She had rationed him to one call a week, and this was it. She had been unhappy when he followed her to Austin, and she had refused to talk to him at first, letting her sister, Rita, take the calls. But she had relented under his persistence.

Philip had followed her to Austin from traffic-snarled Fairfax, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C. They had both worked at MicroMeg, where they had met and fallen in love, and where, finally, the ancient, implacable curse that his father had called the System or sometimes, Yog-Sothoth or simply the Great Old Ones, had torn them asunder. He was here now to win her back, and he knew he had to proceed with caution. So far he had only spoken to her on the phone, although he had seen her a number of times. He had spied on her; he had crouched low in his car in the shade of live oaks down the street from the house where she was staying with her sister.

He would watch her come out of the house in the morning, get into her car and drive off. So far he had resisted the urge to race up to her, to enfold her in his arms. He didn't want to send her running again. He might lose her forever in the vastness of America.

Amelia, traumatized into blind denial by the doom that came to MicroMeg, refused to acknowledge that the Old Ones even existed, preferred to think that her lover had lost his reason; preferred to flee him rather than confront the truth, as though such flight could negate the dreadful, ghastly facts, the irrefutable history that she and Philip shared.

"You can't deny what happened!" he had shouted.

Oh, but she could.

She loved him, still. Philip could hear that love in her voice, beneath all the careful reserve and skirted subjects.

Philip kept the phone conversation casual, asked how her job search was going.

"Not good," Amelia said. Austin was a city with a large college population. Employers could hire from this student population. There were also a substantial number of people who had gone to the University of Texas for as long as possible, accrued as many degrees as parental funds and grants permitted, and now waited tables, clerked in government positions, or sat in the rental offices of apartment complexes—anything rather than return to, say, El Paso.

And who would want to leave? Austin was lovely, a laid-back town, the last refuge for hordes of aging hippies who drifted up and down the Drag, gray-bearded artifacts who knew all the lyrics to old Leonard Cohen songs and could talk knowledgeably about astral planes and karma.
“I can't find anything,” Amelia complained.

"You will," Philip said. "It just takes a few days sometimes, and you want to be careful anyway. You want to see that there aren't any signs of—" "Philip."

Philip stopped abruptly. Easy. "I just mean you don't have to grab the first job you are offered."

And you want to look in the bathrooms and see what is written there on the walls, and take a peek in the furnace room, and perhaps, quite casually, stick a good-sized pin in a long-term employee and see if she howls.

"I don't feel right about staying here with Rita too long," Amelia said. "She doesn't complain or anything, but I know I'm in the way."

"You could come and live with me," Philip said.

Silence. Philip's heart crawled out of his chest and jumped up and down on the desk: Boom boom boom.

"Are you still writing that novel?" she asked.

His heart climbed back into his chest and lay down, curled on its side, defeated. Why lie? He couldn't fool her. "Yes. Sure."

"Philip, I can't live with you. Look, Rita is expecting a call. I'll talk to you next week, okay?"

"Okay," Philip said.

He went back to his computer and began typing again. The phone call hadn't been a bad one, really. She hadn't said never to call again. She had said, "I'll talk to you next week, okay?"

That was certainly positive. She seemed to have accepted his presence; she wasn't sending him away or running again.

He lay in bed that night and thought, "I'll win her back." In the meantime, of course, he would have to hang on to his own reason; he would have to be ever-vigilant. Once you have gazed on the baleful visage of Yog-Sothoth, your own thoughts are forever suspect.

He needed all his wits, and the first thing he did on arriving in Austin was to throw away all of Dr. Abrams' well-meant prescriptions. Pills might blunt the edge of his fear, but they were not the answer. A man could not spend his life splashing himself with tap water if he lived in a burning house. He had to fireproof his soul.

Books were perhaps the best antidote. Philip purchased used paperbacks. Occasionally, when he couldn't find the book elsewhere, he would check it out of the
library, but he disliked returning a book once it was in his possession, so he availed himself of the library only when diligent search failed to discover the sought-after book.


He found that he did not have to read certain books, that simply keeping them near or upon his person offered protection. These books were The Catcher in the Rye; Cat's Cradle; Little Big Man; Something Wicked This Way Comes; The Sot' Weed Factor; Alice in Wonderland; The Horse's Mouth; Winesburg, Ohio; Sense and Sensibility; The Way of All Flesh; Titus Groan; and War and Peace.

And, of course, he kept the Arkham H. P. Lovecraft books close by, a reference and a warning (The Dunwich Horror and Others, At the Mountains of Madness and Other Novels, Dagon and Other Macabre Tales).

Philip continued to work on his own novel—oh how Amelia hated that novel; and oh how she was wrong about that—presently entitled The Despicable Quest. The book was completed, but he constantly altered it. In over twenty years of alterations, it had grown to four times its original length. He had been sending it to publishers and agents since the late sixties, and he had a drawer full of rejections. Most of the rejections were form letters, often badly photocopied scraps of paper, but occasionally an agent or publisher would actually write or type a brief note, notes dashed off in great haste and suggesting a life far more eventful and momentous than Philip's own grind of blighted hope and menial toil. Recently, these occasional personal missives were filled with words and phrases like "unwieldy," "diffuse," "directionless," and "muddled." The influence of Lovecraft was noted by one agent who said, "Not everyone is familiar with Lovecraft's works or his Cthulhu stories, so a two-thousand-page novel about these obscure monsters might have a limited audience."

In any event, the novel, despite its increased thickness, was beginning to fail Philip as a buffer against dark thoughts and nameless anxieties. Where once the novel had been a refuge from hostile realities it now seemed—Philip stopped, stunned by the possibility that Amelia, intuitively, was right. She had said that the novel was not good for him, was the cause of all his mental problems, and while that was patently untrue and part of her own denial system, what if the novel were, in some way, a malign influence? What if the novel had become a sort of psychic magnet for ancient beasts? What if, every time he typed a sentence, vile, star-shaped heads turned on gruesome necks and listened with outrageous, febrile antennae?

No, the novel was what kept him sane. Indeed, the thought that it might be otherwise was probably planted there by inimical Powers.

These thoughts seemed to heat his brain. He realized that he needed help, someone who could aid him in sorting the clutter of his thoughts.
The next day, Philip perused the ads in the back pages of the Austin Chronicle, a free weekly newspaper. As Philip scanned fine-print blandishments for massage, Tai Chi, psychic healing and self-esteem counseling, he had to battle a growing sense of hopelessness. Was there really anyone who could help him?

He paused before an ad entitled GREEN COUNSEL, How to seek solace and wisdom from common houseplants and he saw himself sitting in a room confiding his troubles to an indifferent cactus or a coolly aloof African violet. At that point he almost abandoned his quest. Fortunately, his eye had to travel less than an inch before arriving at a small box with a dotted border. ISSUES ADDRESSED! it stated (in fourteen point Optima bold). It continued in an unassuming, eight-point serif: Experienced counseling professional can help you define and address your issues. FREE initial session to determine client-counselor compatibility. THERE IS HOPE! Call now.

Philip called the number (twelve-point Helvetica bold).

"I can see you today," the woman said.

"Ah," Philip said. He did not know if he wanted to address an issue that very day. He was coming down with something, the flu perhaps or a bad bout of Austin's famous cedar fever.

"Don't waffle, man," the woman said. "Where do you live? Yes? Well, you are right around the corner. I'll give you directions. I can fit you in at three."

The address proved to be a residence, a small, wood-frame house in a weedy lot.

A frail, elderly woman wearing a Grateful Dead T-shirt and an ankle-length purple skirt rocked on the porch swing.

"You're Philip Kenan," she said. She looked disappointed, or perhaps even disgusted, although this may have been an expression created by the sunlight in her eyes.

Philip nodded his head.

"I'm Lily Metcalf," she said. She came forward and deftly hugged Philip around his middle, leaning forward and pressing an ear against his stomach. She smelled like baked bread, and her thin arms embraced Philip with surprising strength. Lots of gold and silver jewelry jangled on her wrists.

Philip tottered backward.

"Be still!" she shouted.

Philip froze, like a dog surprised in the act of chewing his master's slipper. Lily
Metcalf’s voice had an imperious quality, such as is found in certain high school shop teachers.

He was locked in her embrace for what seemed long minutes, although perhaps it was only seconds. Then she released him and squinted up at him.

"I like to listen right off," she said. "Before a client makes those interpersonal adjustments that are automatic."

"Well?" Philip said.

She shrugged. "I don't know. Sometimes I get a feeling, sometimes I don't."

They went inside. The living room was small and full of light from the gossamer-curtained windows. A breeze made wind chimes sing. Philip sat on a small couch—he'd encountered larger armchairs—while Lily Metcalf made tea.

"You can call me Lily," she said, returning with the tea. She sat down on the couch next to Philip. "I hate it when people call me Dr. Metcalf."

Lily closed her eyes and leaned back. The sunlight showed her face to be a net of wrinkles. Her hair was a gray, spun-glass cloud.

She opened her eyes and cast a long, sideways glance at Philip. "You are what, forty, something like that?"

"I'm forty-five," Philip said.

She sighed and absent-mindedly patted Philip's thigh. "When I was forty-five, my son Homer rushed off to Vietnam full of patriotic piss and vinegar and got himself killed almost instantly. I hope you are having a better forty-five." She sipped some tea, closed her eyes. She seemed to lose track of time, drifting into a brief stupor of melancholy. Philip studied the bright walls of the room. They were covered with miniature oil paintings of a traditional nature (the ocean, some cows, or perhaps bears, on a hillside, a boat—toy, or menaced by a fifty-foot child). Philip studied the mahogany end table, the faded oriental rug, the bookcase full of paperbacks, and was surprised when Lily spoke, being himself fully occupied in his study.

"So, what's your issue?" Lily asked. "Ah—"

"Yeah, sometimes it is hard to leap right in. Maybe I can jump start you. Midlife crisis? Relationship problems? Wait, would you say you want to address high-level or low-level issues?"

"I'm not sure I understand," Philip said.

"Well." Lily put her teacup down and rested her hands on her knees and leaned
forward. "High-level stuff would be self-actualization issues. You might feel restless. Anxiety might trouble your sleep. You might wonder if your success was fraudulent. You might be immobilized by boredom and a lack of purpose."

Philip shook his head. "No, nothing like that."

"Good. Frankly, self-actualization is not my long suit. I'm not good with people who don't have real problems. I am better with people who come here because their lives are in the shitter. I prefer crisis issues, I guess."

"I guess that describes my situation," Philip said. "I guess I am in crisis."

"All right. Good. You mind if I smoke?"

"No. Certainly not."

Lily swept a pack of cigarettes off the end table, banged one out, and lit it in what seemed a single motion. She blew smoke at the ceiling. "Some people see smoking cigarettes as a failure of character. They don't want a therapist who smokes. 'If she can't even quit a bad habit, how is she going to help me?' they ask. What do you think about that?"

"I don't know."

"Good answer, Philip. But the truth is, Jesus Christ probably smelled bad. You know what I mean? Nobody is perfect."

"That's true."

"So what is the crisis?"

"It's a long story."

"I bet. Let's have something shorter up front. How about if you tell me, in one sentence, what's going on. Maybe there are a lot of things going on, but just give me one incident. For example, 'My wife left me' or 'The bank repossessed my car.' We can get at the underlying issues later, but I want to see a problem first, an event." "Ah—"

"You think you can do that? Just one sentence. You understand what I'm asking here?"

"Yes. Yes I guess so."

"Okay, let her rip."

"Well, I lost my job and my girlfriend left me."

"Good," Lily said, nodding her head in violent affirmation as a cloud of
cigarette smoke merged with her cloudy hair. "That's just what I meant. Now we are getting somewhere."

"And hideous, cone-shaped creatures from outer space are going to leap, telepathically, across six hundred million years and destroy human civilization."

It just came out.

Philip glanced at his newfound counselor. Her eyes were closed, and she continued to blow smoke toward the ceiling. She seemed unperturbed by this revelation. Perhaps she was asleep, smoking in her sleep.

But no. She turned her head toward him and opened her eyes, blue eyes that had seen things.

"You are going to be an interesting client," she said.
The session was over.

"Tomorrow, same time," Lily said. "You better come every day for awhile." Philip asked about the cost. "A hundred dollars an hour," Lily said. "Jesus. I can't afford that," Philip said. "I work nights at this raty print shop. I get eight dollars an hour."

The old woman shrugged. "Okay, ten dollars an hour. Take it or leave it."

Philip took it. Walking away from Lily Metcalf and getting into his car, he felt a rush of well-being, an elevation in his self-esteem. He had just saved himself ninety dollars an hour on therapy. Not bad.

At work that evening, Philip was introduced to a new printer, a man named AL Bingham. Bingham was an older guy, sixty or so, bald except for a fuzz of fine gray hair that hovered over his baldness like steam. He possessed a long, pale face furrowed with lines that expressed weary incredulity.

"Pleased to meet ya," he said, shaking Philip's hand. "My heart goes out to you typesetting lads. You've got to read the crap. That has got to take its toll."

Ralph Pederson, Philip's boss, laughed nervously. "It is not for us to judge our customers," he said. Pederson, Philip had noted, was superstitious about such things, believing, perhaps, in an ever-listening god of customer wrath that was a jealous god and would brook no calumny. You never, not ever, said anything negative about a customer. In the restrooms were signs (72 point Helvetica extrabold) that read:

**THE CUSTOMER PAYS OUR SALARIES.**

"People are okay, but the public is an asshole," Bingham said.

*This guy is going to last less than a week*, Philip thought.

It was Tuesday, payday, and Philip got his check along with the usual motivational literature.

Philip knew that he shouldn't read the little pamphlet that came enclosed with the check. These were the mind-rending voices of the ghoul-lizards, the creatures of the System. These tiny tracts had titles like "Be a Team Player" or "Dress for Success" and were produced by some company in New Jersey and were illustrated and designed and written by someone who had not been out of his house since the early fifties and did not, apparently, have a television or other means of discovering changes in fashion or the elimination of sexist language ("office gal," for instance, was no longer synonymous with secretary in the larger world).
Philip thought of calling Lily Metcalf so that she could tell him to throw the pamphlet away without reading it, but he saw the title "Maintaining a Positive Attitude" and he was lost.

The unctuous, self-satisfied tone asserted itself with the first sentence, "Life sets some hard tasks for those who wish to succeed, and an employee who sees such tasks as burdens, who says, 'Why didn't my boss give this to Jones? I've got all I can handle without this,' could find himself out of a job when such an attitude affects his performance."

The writer of these pamphlets had been around—although Philip suspected that he was now a bedridden and bad-tempered invalid—and was inclined to illustrate his message with anecdotes. This time, the writer told the story of Sally, a waitress who was told that her uniform needed to be dry-cleaned every day. Sally, one of the malcontents who populated these moral tales and generally came to a bad end, said, "Why should I have to pay my hard-earned money to have uniforms dry-cleaned every day? I think it is a stupid rule. I'm not going to do it. I can't afford it on the tips I make."

Philip's heart went out to Sally. Why, indeed, should she have to obey such a rule—and spend her own money to do so? If her money-grubbing boss was so set on dry-cleaned-daily uniforms, why didn't he foot the bill?

Melanie, a perkier and no doubt younger waitress, said, "I think it is a good rule. I will do it. By having a bright, sharply pressed uniform every day, I will look and feel better and the customers will see this and give me bigger tips. Even though I will be spending my own money to have my uniforms dry-cleaned daily, the extra money I will make will more than compensate for that initial outlay."

Philip was always impressed by Sally's restraint upon hearing this nonsense. Sally never attempted to strike the smarmy apple polisher.

Philip put the pamphlet down and took a deep breath. A black miasma of despair clouded his mind. This was powerful motivational stuff, almost as strong as the rant on dressing for success which had urged the wearing of suits. The motivational material that Ralph purchased by the case was not tailored to print shops.

Philip got up from his terminal and walked outside. The night air was damp and full of the day's heat. A match flared, and Philip saw the gnarled features of the new printer as that man leaned into the glow of a match, lighting his cigarette.

"Hey typesetter," he said, nodding to Philip. "How is the Resumeracket doing?"

"Okay, I guess," Philip said. "I'm typesetting business cards right now."

"Business cards. You reckon our boss ever wakes up in the middle of the night and wonders what the meaning of life is? You reckon he shakes his wife awake and
"Honey, tell me again why we are in such a godawful hurry to see that every asshole in Travis County has five hundred pieces of cardboard with his name on them."

Philip laughed nervously. "No, I don't think our employer worries about that sort of thing."

Bingham laughed, smoke erupting from his nostrils. "You bet he doesn't. Any capitalist worth a goddam knows there's no profit in the meaning of life."

Philip agreed that there was no profit in philosophy. All was unknowable, blessedly unknowable, and what was glimpsed of truth was a ravening beast whose corrosive breath alone could boil human flesh. Philip left Bingham and returned to his computer. No Work No Worries No Money, some old fart declared.

#

"I love her," Philip said. They were sitting in Lily's backyard, sitting in lawn chairs in the shade of twisted live oaks.

Lily was wearing a shapeless yellow dress and sunglasses. Her feet were bare. Sunlight, filtered through the leaves, wove green shadows over the both of them.

"So you followed her to Austin," Lily said.

Philip nodded his head. "Yes. And at first she wouldn't talk to me. I mean, she wanted to put it all behind her, and I was part of it. I understand that. She doesn't want to believe that the Old Ones exist, even though she was right there, even though—"

Lily interrupted. "The Old Ones are the monsters from outer space, the creatures from hundreds of millions of years in the past who controlled this corporation you worked for, this MicroMeg."

"Well, not exactly. They didn't control it, at least not originally, but it was a Doorway."

Lily waved a blue-veined hand. "If Amelia were here, how would she explain her actions?"

"She's confused. She doesn't want to look at—"

"Philip. Tell me what she would say if I asked her why she came to Austin."

Philip rubbed his hand on the back of his neck. This therapy was hot work. "She would say she had to get away from me, that I was crazy."

"Crazy," Lily repeated. She lit a cigarette and waved the match out. "Are you crazy?"
"Of course not."

"How would Amelia describe you?"

"She would say that I had no ambition and didn't like going to jobs. She would say that I was easily bored, and so I turned everything into fantasy. She would say that the novel I was working on, which is a sort of H. P. Lovecraft type story, had gotten out of hand, had driven me crazy."

"Hmmmmmm," Lily said. "Your Amelia says quite a lot when given the opportunity."

Philip shrugged.

"How do you feel about jobs?" Lily asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever had a job that you liked?"

Philip frowned. "No, I guess not."

"Tell me about your first job," Lily said.

Philip looked up. "Well, I had chores and stuff for my allowance, but I guess my first real job was mowing our neighbor's lawn. That was Mr. Bluett. He was a very weird dude, a fat, pear-shaped guy who wore these big, oversized shorts. He was an old guy with a lot of money. He told jokes, lots of jokes, one right after another." "So how was the job?" "At first it was just fine." "And later."

"Later it wasn't so good." "Tell me about it."
3.

The lawnmower had stalled out in a huff of blue smoke, vomiting clumps of cut grass. Philip yanked on the pull rope, and the motor coughed like a fat man choking on cigar smoke.

*Great, just great.*

It had to be a hundred degrees out, August, not a cloud in the sky, the sun a bright, unfocused blur. Philip itched all over, tortured by the gritty paste of grass and dust that coated his skin.

Philip pulled on the cord again, and the engine caught. The mower leapt forward, an undisciplined dog tugging on its leash.

Mr. Bluett's house was a big white mansion two streets over from the house Philip lived in with his mother and the ghost of his father and the ancient, ever-watching Elder Ones. The lawn was a long, rolling expanse, green even in the last sere days of summer.

Philip finished mowing the lawn and was emptying another bag of grass clippings into a trash can when Mr. Bluett came around the corner of the house.

"Wicked hot, isn't it, Philip?" he said.

"Yes sir," Philip said.

"You don't have to call me sir," Mr. Bluett said. "The queen didn't make me a knight." He laughed. He was a soft old guy with boiled-red flesh and thin, reddish hair that rippled tightly over his skull. He was rich, having made a fortune in real estate. He wore a shirt decorated with colored fish and big, floppy blue shorts and flip-flops.

"Thirsty?" Mr. Bluett asked.

"Yes s—Yes."

Mr. Bluett nodded. "Come on. I got iced tea."

Mr. Bluett put an arm on Philip's shoulder and led him around the house to the swimming pool in the back.

A big pitcher of iced tea rested on a white patio table.

The ice rattled as Bluett filled a large plastic tumbler and handed it to Philip.

"Looks good," Bluett said, surveying the lawn with his hands on his hips. "You do good work, Philip. How old are you?"
"Thirteen," Philip said.

"A teenager! Well, damn. I was a teenager once myself, although you might find that hard to believe. You getting any pussy?"

Philip said nothing. He was feeling uncomfortable. Adults didn't say "pussy." Kids like Ronnie Hargrave and rowdy Butch Walker said "pussy." The iced tea made Philip's stomach hurt, and Mr. Bluett was leaning forward, his face oily with suntan lotion, his breath sour and fleshy beneath a coating of minty mouthwash.

"Maybe you ain't worked up to pussy yet," Bluett said. His voice sounded different now, shifting the way a grown-up's voice will. "You might be practicing with your buddies first. You know, sucking each other's dicks."

Philip shook his head, frowning. "I have to be getting home," he said.

"Hey," Bluett said, standing up, "it ain't no big deal. Let me pay you for that lawn. You done a fine job."

Bluett pulled out his wallet and thumbed through the bills. He frowned. "Looks like I got nothing but a twenty. Well damn. Hey, you been mowing my lawn all summer, call it a bonus."

He handed the twenty to Philip.

Twenty dollars! Great!

"Thank you," Philip said.

"Hey, you're a good kid." Bluett reached forward and ruffled Philip's head. Then, suddenly, he leaned forward, cupped the back of Philip's head with his hand, shoved his face into Philip's and kissed Philip on the lips.

Philip shouted, fell backward. The plastic tumbler bounced on the flagstones and ice leapt out.

Philip got up and ran. He heard Mr. Bluett behind him, shouting.

"It ain't no big deal!" Mr. Bluett was shouting. "It ain't anything to get exercised about!"

Philip reached his bike, jumped on it, and raced down the hill.

"So that's how your first job ended," Lily said.

"No," Philip said. "I worked for him the next summer too. I got twenty dollars every time I mowed his lawn."

"And did he make any more sexual advances?"
"No, not exactly. Sometimes he would ask me to get something out of the pool. I'd have to take off my clothes to go into the pool. I forget why, but you couldn't wear clothes in the pool."

"How did you feel about that?"

"He gave me thirty dollars on pool days."

"So how did you feel about it?"

"Creepy."

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That night Philip dreamed he was underwater, down in the green shadow world of old man Bluett's swimming pool. He had gone in to recover a watch. The watch was a waterproof Timex and, if Philip wasn't mistaken, Bluett had been wearing it only twenty minutes earlier.

The cold water enclosed Philip's nakedness, cut out the hot, drumming day as death itself might, and plunged him into this dappled, chill world. The chlorine stung his eyes.

What if his mother were to march briskly, that very instant, through the Odells' yard, across the street, down the little path between the Clarks and the Wardens, across another street and, moving faster now, down the new-mown hill to the swimming pool?

Philip would jump, dripping from the pool and his mother, her gray eyes flashing, would turn to old Bluett and demand an explanation and Bluett would mumble that it was no big deal, but he would not be able to meet her eyes and shame would descend on Philip like hard rain on a tin roof.

Philip concentrated on the thirty dollars. His eyes sought the watch.

He saw, for the first time, that the bottom of the pool was not concrete but a twisting lattice of pipe, pale white tubes that intertwined elaborately. As Philip drew closer, the pipes began to move, flowing like the bodies of thick serpents although never was a head revealed, nor a tail, and perhaps they did not crawl between and around each other but merely gave the illusion of doing so through a wavelike rippling of their flesh.

Philip knew it for what it was, this loathsome, monstrous knot of serpents: Cthulhu, bathed in eldritch green light, sprung from watery R'lyeh.

Philip, numb with revulsion and terror, swam closer yet, powered by the perverse will of the dream.