



THE SAMSON PROJECT

Inch by inch the shadows crept across the yards until the day unwillingly surrendered itself to the night. The onset of night saw children hurrying home and parents locking their doors and bolting their windows. And once again that innocuous playground, that busy city street, even the quiet suburban neighborhoods all gave themselves up to those who call the night their own.

It was the fear I held for this city, or at least it's darker half, that drove me away, and it was that same fear that lured me back and would eventually end a terror that had gripped the city for what seemed a lifetime.

To someone just passing through, the city looked like any other it's size. But with a population of thirty six thousand (though steadily declining), the city had an industrial base and a retail structure now barely adequate to support the city's declining numbers. There was, as there

is in any city of this size, a downtown region, then branching outwards, the suburbs.

The sun was slipping behind the trees as I reached the outskirts of town. The speed limit slowed to forty-five. Off to my right was a sign, its finish peeling from years of exposure to the elements. 'Welcome to Gorland Creek,' it read. The space below that normally indicated the population had been painted over so many times that it was no longer legible.

As I continued, the landscape became more populated. There had been some new structures built since I left here almost three and a half years ago. None, however, were homes. Most of them were storage buildings, and most all of those were rented by people who had locked up their valuables and fled, hoping things would change and they could some day return to live a normal life in the place they'd grown up. That day was closer than anyone imagined.

As I drove deeper into town, I began to notice perhaps the most striking thing that set this city apart from any other it's size; the street vendors. There was a cart on nearly every street corner, though these vendors offered no variety of goods. All of them sold the same thing; vegetables. The carts were filled with wilted lettuce and cabbage, and over-ripened tomatoes, turnips, and carrots. None of them were selling trinkets or sharpening knives, no one offering hot dogs or sodas. They all sold vegetables; limp, insipid, week-old looking vegetables. Of my fonder memories of childhood, none had anything to do with vegetables, particularly the culinary rejects sold by these street vendors. They looked unfit for human consumption, but people were lined up to buy them. Having been gone from here as long as I had, I'd forgotten how important these vegetable carts were. The reminder was sobering.

I turned right down a side street, and then left for two blocks. The neighborhood looked just as it did when I left. Nothing had changed much over the years. The same cars sat in the same driveways, and the houses that needed painting then still needed it today. But most of all I noticed the front yards, or should I say the lack of them. Each house had a square patch of dirt in front of it where one would expect to find a bright green patch of grass. Some of the yards had been covered with small white rocks and still others had been poured solid with concrete. But there was not a blade of grass, a flower or even a weed to be found anywhere. Nor was there a shrub, a rose bush or a garden of any kind. It was like being in the desert, with a temperature of fifty-eight degrees at dusk.

I coasted to a stop in front of a small, two story wood frame house built back in the thirties. As houses go, it was as well kept as any other on the block, although the paint appeared

somewhat dull and faded.

I switched off the engine and stepped out of my car. As my eyes scanned the street lined with similar cold, dismal looking wood structures, reality was beginning to sink in. I was back.

My thoughts were interrupted by a sharp clicking sound as a door was unlocked and cautiously opened. After a brief look up and down the street, the figure of a woman in her mid sixties emerged. She stared at me briefly before starting down the porch steps. I wasn't sure if her look was one of disbelief or disappointment. When she reached the last step, she walked quickly towards me with open arms.

"Andy, it's so good to see you." She threw her arms around me and squeezed me tightly.

"It's good to see you too Aunt May." As I hugged her, I sensed a tension, and uneasiness that wasn't there before.

"How long has it been?" she asked, releasing me from her embrace.

"It's been a little over three years."

"You know, I still have every one of the letters you've written me. I've kept them all."

"Well I've got quite a collection myself," I confessed.

"Get your things and let's go inside. The sun will be setting soon." Aunt May glanced deliberately around as I pulled my suitcase from the back seat and closed the door. "Before it gets dark, you must pull your car up into the driveway. Get as close to the garage door as you can manage."

The garage sat behind and to the left of the house. The driveway was maybe thirty feet long. Aunt May's car was inside the garage and the door was closed.

She walked briskly across the dry, crusted dirt in the front yard and up the steps, stopping at the front door to wait for me. I took a long look around before following her. In the distance, I saw a man closing the wooden shutters on his first floor windows. Those houses that didn't have wooden shutters had metal hurricane shutters. How strange it was to see hurricane shutters in a city some twelve hundred miles from the coast.

The inside of Aunt May's house hadn't changed much in three and a half years. She had bought a new chair for the living room and there were a few more pictures of family members decorating the walls, but overall things were pretty much as they were when I left.

Aunt May had gone to the kitchen to put on a pot of tea as any good aunt would do. She spoke to me from the kitchen as I stood admiring the photographs hanging in the front hall.

“How long did you live with me before you moved out to California?”

“Five years,” I answered without hesitation. She knew the answer to the question, and I knew where this conversation was going. Nonetheless I played my part, feeling that I somehow owed it to her.

“Have you ever given any thought to moving back? Think of all the money you could save. You could write your articles here and email your work back to those magazines in California. You could write that blog of yours from here as well. All we need is an internet connection and I’ve already got a quote from the cable company for it.”

My eyes popped away from the photo I was examining. What could my sixty eight-year-old aunt possibly know about the electronic media? She had never touched a computer in her life.

“Surprised you, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did,” I admitted. “When did you become so computer literate?”

“Oh I’ve been reading up on it,” she replied casually. “Besides, how do you expect me to talk you into moving back here unless I can answer all your reasons for staying in California?”

I knew this would be part of the conversation. I just didn’t think it would come so soon. I always felt guilty for leaving, but I couldn’t stay and helplessly watch what was going on around me. Aunt May didn’t realize that the purpose of my visit was to talk her into returning to California with me. I knew it wouldn’t be easy. I was hoping it wouldn’t be impossible.

She brushed past me with a tray upon which sat a teapot, two cups, a sugar bowl and a plate of cookies. I followed her into the living room (the sitting room as she liked to call it) and sat down in the center of the couch. Aunt May sat in her usual chair, a fifties looking piece of furniture wrapped in a heavily textured gold colored fabric. The arms of the chair were almost a foot wide and angled slightly towards the seat. On the right arm was Aunt May’s latest crocheting project. On the left sat a magazine and the remote control for the TV.

She had put the tray on the coffee table in front of me. I filled both cups with tea, handing one to her.

“Is it getting any better?” I asked. Although I never made specific reference to what *it* was, she knew exactly what I was asking.

“I don’t know as anyone’s looking for it to get any better,” she replied without emotion. “But it’s not getting any worse. Besides, those of us that have stayed have come to learn what

we can and can't do. As long as we keep doing what we're supposed to do, we'll be fine."

"How do you know that?" I asked. "How can you be sure?"

Aunt May reached under the cushion of her chair and pulled out a magazine. From it she removed a somewhat worn but fairly well preserved piece of paper that looked as if it were used as a bookmark. Carefully she unfolded it and handed it to me. I took my glasses from my shirt pocket and began to read.

It was a letter, a form letter from a company called GCR, Gorland Creek Chemical Research Co., a pharmaceuticals company here in Gorland Creek. As I began to read, I realized what was once conjecture and assumption on my part had now been validated. The letter was addressed informally to 'homeowner' at twelve eleven West Palm Street. It was not dated.

Dear concerned citizen, it began. In light of the recent and unexpected turn of events, we here at GCR Pharmaceuticals have taken it upon ourselves to try and explain, as best we can, the phenomenon that has struck fear and anxiety into the hearts and minds of our citizens.

Through an unfortunate and quite unintentional mechanical malfunction, a substantial quantity of an experimental enzyme was released into the city's sewer system. By itself, this enzyme was harmless and should have quickly dissipated into the waste water supply virtually unnoticed. Sadly, that was not the case. By a tragic twist of fate, a very potent residue of an as yet unknown chemical compound was also present in the sewer.

To the best of our knowledge, the reaction that took place between the chemical and the enzyme caused the enzyme's activity to accelerate. The enzyme was developed to absorb bacteria, acting as a cleaning agent, but once it came in contact with the chemical, it's size increased exponentially, and it's appetite became voracious.

It divided itself into many separate, but substantive parts, devouring all of the bacteria and waste in the storm sewer system. Then, its food supply depleted, it emerged from the sewer seeking the nourishment it now craved.

Life outside the storm sewer provided little bacteria, so at this point something inexplicable occurred. It modified its own molecular structure to accommodate the closest and most prolific food supply; vegetation. This would account for the absence of all vegetation of any kind within twenty feet of the streets.

Because of this, we strongly urge you to provide these organisms food. We recommend that each household place a small pile of vegetation, whether it be vegetables, flowers or even

weeds, in your front yard each evening. Since they are nocturnal, there is no risk to you or anyone in your household during the daylight hours. Of course, adequate financial compensation for this will be provided.

In light of the fact that they do possess the ability to modify themselves to accommodate their food supply, we can only assume that if the vegetation they currently consume becomes depleted, they will modify themselves again. We assume this modification would render them carnivorous and would present obvious and dire consequences.

So we urge you to comply with our wishes until a solution can be found to this most difficult dilemma. We will correspond further as additional information becomes available.

The letter was not signed, but it was on company letterhead. This was the first explanation I had ever been given as to why these things even existed. And although a plan of action was mapped out, it was clear that the residents of this city could not go on feeding these things indefinitely.

I took off my glasses and looked over at Aunt May, who had begun to crochet while I was reading.

“Aunt May, you’ve got to get away from here. Come with me back to California. You’ll be safe there. You can live with me. I lived here with you for five years after mom and dad were killed, so I owe it to you.”

Aunt May sat her crocheting down on the arm of the chair. “I’ve lived in this house for over forty years. Your uncle and I bought it right after we were married. Even though he’s gone, I still feel him here from time to time. It’s almost like part of him never really left. I could never leave this house. It would be like, well, like leaving your uncle.”

I looked over at the mantle above the fireplace. Sitting in the middle of it was an urn containing the ashes of Uncle Gordon. I stared at the urn for a moment collecting my thoughts. But before I could speak Aunt May changed the subject.

“You’d better move your car into the driveway. And while you’re out, take the bag of turnips I’ve left on the kitchen table with you and spread them out on the front yard by the street, would you please?”

Her eyes smiled at me with a look I have never been able to say no to.

“Sure. Be glad to,” I told her as I passed by her on my way to the kitchen.

The sun was beginning to set. The streets were empty except for a couple of stray cats

picking through the pile of vegetables in a yard two houses down. I sat the bag down on the bottom step of the porch while I pulled my car into the driveway and up to the old wooden garage door.

After locking it, I walked back to the front steps and picked up the bag. I carried it across the yard and emptied the overly ripened turnips out onto the dirt next to the street. I thought it a shame to be wasting food this way, but I suppose it wasn't really a waste if it was keeping those things vegetarians. My thoughts however were soon interrupted by a coarse but familiar sounding voice.

“Well, look at you. I haven't seen you in years.”

I turned in the direction of the voice to see Charles Kempford, a retired army officer and Aunt May's neighbor of many years, standing in the driveway. We grew to be good friends while I was living with my aunt.

“What brings you back to these parts, son?”

“Charles,” I exclaimed as I walked across the yard towards him, “you haven't changed a bit.”

With the exception of a few more wrinkles on his already weathered face, he still looked just as I remembered him. He stood about six feet tall with the build of a football player. He kept himself in good shape with a well regimented exercise routine that he practiced every day. The old army discipline, I suppose.

“Oh, I've changed alright,” he contended as I shook his hand, “I've gotten meaner.” We both laughed, something that didn't occur around here much anymore. But the smiles soon left our faces.

“I came back to check on Aunt May. I'm not really sure what it was other than that. I just got this feeling that something was going to happen.”

“It's getting bad around here, son.” (Charles always called me son, maybe because he never married and had no children of his own.) Those things are getting bigger and bolder and nobody seems to be able to do anything about it.”

I stared at the ground for a moment before asking my next question. “Charles, have you ever tried to shoot one of them?”

Charles smiled. “Sure I have. First time one of them came up into my yard I got my twelve gauge and pumped four rounds into it. Blew it into a hundred little pieces,” he said.

“So what happened?” I asked eagerly.

Charles hesitated with the temperament of a soldier surrendering to the enemy. “Each one of those pieces slithered back into the sewer. The next night there were a hundred more of them eating every blade of grass and weed in the neighborhood.”

“Well there’s got to be a way to get rid of these things,” I said in frustration.

“I’ve tried everything,” Charles answered, throwing his hands into the air. “I’ve squirted them with the hose; I’ve doused them with gasoline, vinegar, motor oil, hell I even pissed on one of them once. Nothing seems to have any affect on them.”

As we spoke dusk had begun to fall and one by one, bright halogen lights began popping on in front of every house on the street.

“See those?” Charles asked, pointing at the light above Aunt May’s porch.

“Yeah, everybody seems to have one, why?”

“GCR sent electricians out here and installed one of those bright lights on every house. They turn on automatically at dusk. Light seems to be one of the few things those critters don’t like. But, judging by the letter I got some time back, they’ll probably get used to that too if they have to.”

Before the conversation went any further, Aunt May’s front door opened and she stepped out onto the porch. “Better come in soon, Andy.” she cautioned. “It’s getting dark.”

I turned back towards Charles and spoke in a near whisper. “I’ll stop by tomorrow. Maybe we can pick up this conversation where we left off.”

“Sounds good to me,” he answered. “If you got any ideas for getting rid of these things, there’s no shortage of guinea pigs to try them out on.”

I shook his hand and walked back to May’s house. Pausing at the top of the steps for a moment, I looked out towards the street. There was a storm drain next to the curb in front of her house that led down to the storm sewer. It was there to allow the rainwater to drain from the street. I watched it for a moment, expecting to see something.

“You won’t see any of them until much later.” Aunt May was standing behind me. “Now close and lock the shutters, then come on in. Supper is almost ready.”

I must admit Aunt May’s pot roast and mashed potatoes were a welcome change from the fast food rut I seemed to have fallen into. After eating my share (and then some), I helped my aunt with the dishes. She washed and I dried, just as she and Uncle Gordon had done up until he

passed away.

With our domestic chores behind us I switched off the kitchen light and the two of us sat down in the living room. We visited a while longer, then, after a long and deliberate yawn I excused myself, blaming the trip for my fatigue. I kissed my aunt good night and walked upstairs to the spare bedroom. Since the room was on the front side of the house, the window afforded me full view of the front yard and the street. I slid a chair over to the window then turned out the light.

Sitting backwards on the chair with my elbows resting on the back, I stared out into the darkness. All seemed quiet. The turnips I had scattered across the front yard remained undisturbed. The only signs of life were those two stray cats that were working their way down the street looking for food.

As I watched the cats, I noticed one of them arch its back. Something had spooked it. I looked over towards the storm sewer. What looked like a large mass of brownish colored jelly was pulling itself up onto the street. It moved in much the same way as a snail, only more quickly and deliberately. And size notwithstanding, it resembled a snail in both texture and shape. All that was missing was the shell. It looked to be about three feet across when it finally slithered clear of the sewer. They were not nearly this big three and a half years ago.

The light glistened against the slimy surface of its body as it moved its way up the curb towards the sidewalk. It had neither a head nor a tail, or any point of reference from which direction could be determined. Its actions though seemed focused and intentional. It moved with a noticeable degree of determination and vehemence. Its very appearance reeked of intimidation. And although none of them had ever harmed a human, it may have only been because they'd never been given the opportunity.

Watching these repulsive creatures reminded me of my first encounter with them. My headlights briefly exposed one of them as I turned into the driveway late one night. I got out of my car, flashlight in hand, and walked over to it. Its covering (I hesitate to use the word skin) had the look and texture of a calf's brain I had seen once in a butcher shop. It moved, undaunted by my presence, toward the grass where it began to feed. They were much smaller then. I remember thinking them to be about the size of something left behind by a cow in the pasture.

They had grown from twelve inches to over three feet in less than four years. It was obvious that their abundant food supply was contributing to their growth. The absence of it

however, may have much worse consequences.

I buried my face in my hands. I was having second thoughts about this whole thing. Aunt May was resistant to leaving the house and even worse, wanted me to move back. These things have gotten larger and greater in number and could, under the right conditions, become a threat to the people who live here. I knew I had to make a decision, one that has no up side as far as I could tell.

I sat thinking of what I could say to Aunt May to convince her to leave. I rehearsed every possible argument in my mind until I felt I was as prepared as I was going to be. Then, being genuinely tired, I crawled into bed. Outside the window the front yard had become the feeding ground for seven of the giant brown creatures. They pushed and prodded their way among the vegetables, lunging and hissing at one another, their bodies secreting a vile, gel-like substance, which coated the ground beneath them. Because of their size and number, they had become much more aggressive.

They consumed the vegetables quickly, almost ravenously. They had no mouths. They simply slithered on top of the food and within a few seconds, it was gone. I could only imagine what it would be like if an animal, or even a person, were to become part of this food chain.

This entire nightly ritual took only a few minutes to perform. When it was over, they disappeared back into the storm sewers, their daylight absence a morose reward for the nourishment provided them.

The first rays of the morning sun were beginning to peek over the rooftops. I stood in the center of the front yard where last night I had poured out a good ten pounds of turnips. No trace of them remained. Not a leaf or a peel or even a scrap; nothing. The only evidence that anything had been in the yard at all were the rows of wavy parallel lines in the dirt that the creatures made as they slithered back to the storm sewer, and a light crusted coating of slime which soon melted away in the morning sun.

“This is ridiculous,” I said aloud to myself. To my surprise, I received a reply.

“You’re damn right it is.”

I turned to see Charles walking towards me with a cup of coffee in each hand. He handed one to me, which I gratefully accepted. The cup warmed my hands in the cool morning air.

“I can’t believe how much bigger they have gotten since I left.”

Charles took a sip from his cup. “Yep, and the bigger they get, the more they eat.”

“Charles, there’s got to be a way to get rid of these things. You were in the army most of your life. Don’t you have some ideas?”

“It’s like I told you last night, I’ve tried everything. I tried to set one on fire once, but it wouldn’t burn. I’ve tried poison, but it won’t kill them. And anything you spray on them can’t get past that tough hide of theirs.”

“Well I’ve got an idea.” I watched carefully for Charles’ reactions as I spoke. “Let’s trap one of those things. We’ll lock it up in a cage in your workshop. Then we can experiment on it and see if we can come up with something that will kill it.”

Charles smiled a little as I spoke. “Taking prisoners, I never thought of that.” He looked over in the direction of his workshop, then back at me. “But I like it.”

He took another sip of coffee. “I got a metal cage big enough to hold a Great Dane. We’ll set it up and bait it tonight.” Charles looked over in my direction. “You got some ideas about what to do with it when we catch it?”

I looked back at him with a menacing smile. “Yeah, I got some ideas.”

I took the last sip from the cup and handed it back to Charles. We set a time to meet that evening, and I went back in the house.

Aunt May was already up and fixing breakfast. “Did you have a nice visit with Charles?” she asked, her tone not sarcastic but definitely headed in that direction.

“Yes I did,” I answered innocently. “We were discussing your nocturnal visitors and how to get rid of them.”

Aunt May popped two pieces of bread into the toaster. “Oh, he’s been trying to do that ever since those things started coming up in his yard. He hasn’t had any luck and you won’t either. I’m sure GCR will come up with a solution one of these days. We just need to give them enough time.”

I could tell that any further discussion of this would be pointless so I changed the subject.

We had a busy day. I took Aunt May shopping, helped her rearrange some furniture and made some minor repairs to her house. By mid afternoon she was a little tired, so I convinced her to go upstairs and take a nap.

While she slept, I went through some old boxes on the top shelf of the guest room closet.

I found one containing some of my old college textbooks. I sorted through them until I came across the one I was looking for. It was the text book I used in a chemistry class I took.

After helping my aunt with the supper dishes, I told her that I had promised Charles I would come over and help him lift an old trunk down from his attic. I told her I'd probably drink a beer with him afterwards. I felt bad for lying to her but I felt even worse about what had been going here on all these years.

I slipped next door and tapped lightly against the glass in Charles' back door.

"In here," came a voice from behind me.

Charles was in his workshop. On his bench was a large, heavy wire cage. The door was held open by a length of thin wire which was connected to a spool with a spring-loaded mechanism on the side.

"Is this it?" I asked.

"This is it," Charles answered. "The cage has a remote activated release on the door mechanism. The door will shut when this button is pressed." Charles reached into his pocket and produced a small remote control with a single button. "So here's the plan," he continued, "when one of them takes the bait, we shut the door and pull the cage up to the workshop with this rope." Charles secured one end of the rope to the backside of the cage as he spoke. When the knot was tight, he turned to me with an uncharacteristically solemn expression on his face. "Now, what do we do once we've caught it?"

I pulled a piece of paper from my pocket. "I've made a list. Most of these things are common household items. See how many of them you have."

Charles took the list and scanned it quickly.

"I think I've got most of this stuff. I'll be right back." He left the workshop in search of the items on the list, leaving me alone to see what, if anything, in the workshop could be useful to us.

There were mostly tools, many of them quite old, but all of them hanging neatly and deliberately on the wall. There were some common pesticides, which I was sure he had already tried. I pulled open one of the drawers below the workbench. In it were a handful of screwdrivers, a pair of side cutters and a .38 caliber revolver. As I gently pushed the drawer closed, I heard the hinges on the back door squeak as it open and soon after Charles' footsteps making their way back to the workshop.

“I had everything on your list except the muriatic acid. Isn’t that the stuff you clean bricks with?” he asked, sitting a small cardboard box down on the bench.

“Yeah, it is.”

“Well maybe if I had a brick house I’d have some, but I don’t.”

“No problem,” I assured him. “It was a long shot anyway. Even if none of this stuff works, we can always just leave it in the cage and let the son of a bitch starve to death.”

So, with everything as ready as we could manage, Charles carried the cage out of the workshop and down the driveway to the front yard. He positioned it with the door facing the street. I followed close behind carrying a bag of vegetables, some of which I poured into the trap. With everything ready, Charles and I crept around the corner of the house. Charles gently uncoiled the rope as we walked. When we stopped, Charles whispered to me.

“When the door shuts, I’m going to pull the cage as fast as I can back to the shop. Hopefully none of the others will notice. When we get in the shop, you close and lock the door behind us, just in case. Got it?”

“Got it,” I whispered back.

This all seemed a little spooky to me, but Charles seemed to be enjoying it. Maybe it reminded him of his military days. I wondered what was going through his mind as he stared intently at the trap. I knew what was going through mine, and I didn’t like it.

We stood poised at the corner of the house for about thirty minutes and watched as one by one the halogen lights popped on above each and every porch up and down the block. The street was dark and empty except for those same two stray cats that somehow managed to exist on the vegetables and odd table scraps that wound up in the front yards each night.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the sound of metal hitting metal. It sounded like a manhole cover being maneuvered into place. We both looked out from around the corner of the house. The creatures had begun their nightly migration out of the sewers to feed. They slithered mindlessly up over the curbs and across the sidewalks towards the piles of vegetation that had been left for them. They all seemed to come up out of the sewer simultaneously as if someone had rung a dinner bell. They poured out onto the street and up over the curb, dozens of ubiquitous brown piles of unknown molecular structure. They don’t think, they don’t communicate and they’ve never harmed anyone. Yet they were holding an entire city hostage.

As we watched, one of them began to make its way toward the cage. It was alone. None

of the others were even close to it. Charles carefully removed the remote control from his pocket. Its shape seemed to change as it squeezed itself through the opening and into the cage. Once it had cleared the door, Charles hit the button and the creature was trapped.

“We got it!” he yelled as he slid the remote control into his pocket. “Now fall in behind the cage when I pull it past you.”

I stepped out towards the middle of the driveway as Charles began to pull on the rope. The cage didn't move. I looked back at Charles just in time to see his feet fly out from under him as he fell to the ground.

“Son of a bitch,” he screamed, “this thing weighs a ton. Help me pull it.”

I ran over to him and grabbed onto the rope. We both pulled with all our might. It took every ounce of our combined strength to move the cage only a couple of inches. Although the concrete was smooth, every little twig and pebble we came upon created a near insurmountable obstacle. It was like dragging a pallet of bricks up a mountain.

As we painstakingly made our way towards the workshop, our prisoner began thrashing about maniacally in the cage, letting out a high pitched, almost ear splitting scream. The sound was deafening, but we remained undaunted in our pursuit to get the thing into the workshop. I couldn't speak for Charles, but my actions that, only a few feet back down the driveway were motivated by will, were now driven by fear.

The cage was jerking back and forth under the absolute might of its prisoner. It was beginning to bend a little at the corners under the stress. I was starting to doubt that we would make it to the workshop.

We were about five feet from the door when Charles dropped to his knees, his right hand clutching his chest.

“Are you okay?” I screamed. I let go of the rope thinking he was having a heart attack. “I'm fine,” he barked. “I just got to have a rest. I'm getting too old for this kind of crap.” Charles was breathing heavily and we were both perspiring as if it were the middle of August.

“Well, we got it this far,” I said. “We should be all right now.”

The creature was still jerking about wildly about the cage, stopping only to let out another deafening shriek.

“Aw shut up,” I jeered, “your buddies can't help you now.” I had no idea how wrong I was. Something caught my eye in Charles' driveway. I leaned outward and looked past the

cage. What I saw made me forget about how hot and tired I was.

“Charles, get up. We got to get the cage inside the workshop right now.” He jumped up and grabbed the rope.

“What’s your hurry? It’s not going anywhere,” Charles complained.

“Look down the driveway,” I screamed.

Charles looked out over the top of the cage. The driveway was a sea of moving brown tissue. There must have been fifty or more of them moving up the driveway towards the cage-towards us. Charles stood mesmerized for a second or two until my persistent yelling brought him back to reality.

“Grab the damn rope!”

We both pulled with all out might and the cage began to move again. There was only about six feet between the cage and the angry hoard pursuing it. Pulling furiously on the rope, I backed into the workshop first, with Charles only a foot ahead of me on the rope. Then, our feet planted firmly on the floor, we pulled the cage up to the doorway. It came to an abrupt stop against the threshold. As hard as we pulled, it would not budge. The horde of slithering reinforcements was quickly closing in on us.

The intimidation was not in the creatures themselves, but in the sheer number of them. I looked up and observed the total absence of the driveway. It was completely covered all the way out to the street and from Charles’ house to his neighbor’s. The more the captive one shrieked, the faster they would move. But as I watched them in my current state of panic, I began to notice something. The movement slowed very quickly until the trapped one shrieked again. The angry hoard would then lunge forward for a few seconds before slowing again.

“Open the cage door,” I bellowed at Charles.

“What? Are you nuts?”

“No. We can’t get it in here. It’s a no-win situation. Open the damned door.”

“I’ve never backed down from the enemy before in my life,” Charles declared angrily.

“We can’t win this, Charles. Trust me. Just open the door and let the damned thing go.”

Charles glared intensely at me for a second, then pulled the remote from his pocket and pressed the button. The door popped open and the captive one quickly passed through it and rejoined the others. Their direction immediately changed and they began moving back towards the street. Once they were out of sight we pulled the cage inside the workshop. It was all but

destroyed. Still breathing heavily, we stared at it for a moment, then left the workshop, closing and locking the door on our way out.

We staggered through Charles' back door and up a small flight of steps to the kitchen. I collapsed in a chair at the table while Charles opened a cabinet door and took out two glasses and a bottle. He poured us both a drink, then came over and sat down at the table across from me.

He took a long sip from his glass. "I had no idea those things would protect each other like that. What a waste of time tonight was."

"Not really," I argued, "we learned something."

"What, that they aren't as afraid of us as we are of them?"

"No, like they can't see. They relied on the sounds from the one in the cage to direct them. And their body mass, their weight. How much do you think that thing weighed?"

"At least three hundred pounds, maybe more," Charles grunted, rubbing his lower back."

"And, it appears those halogen lights were a waste of money. They passed through the light without even noticing it."

"So can we expect them in the daylight hours now?" Charles grimaced.

"No, but that tells me that maybe it's not just light that they don't like. Maybe it's sunlight."

Charles sat still, his drink clutched in his hand. I could see the wheels turning. Maybe he thought we were on to something. I took a swallow of the whiskey that Charles had sat in front of me, wincing at the taste, then continued.

"You see, tonight wasn't a total loss. The only way we're going to be able to do anything about these things is to find out as much as we can about them. Besides, isn't that what you army guys do, identify the enemy and exploit their weaknesses?" I took another sip and was again reminded why I don't drink hard liquor.

I could tell by the look on his face that Charles was thinking. His resolve seemed to intensify a bit as he tipped his glass back, finishing its contents in one last gulp. "So what are we going to do to them tomorrow night?" he asked in an amused voice.

"I don't know. I'll meet you out front tomorrow around six thirty and we'll figure it out."

Charles offered me another drink before I left, but it was all I could do to choke down the first one. Besides, I needed to get back to Aunt May's before she became suspicious. And I certainly didn't want to go back drunk.

I bid Charles good night then slipped back to Aunt May's house, walking in the back door and through the kitchen. She was in the sitting room crocheting. A cup of tea was sitting on the arm of her chair. The pot and an empty cup sat alone on the coffee table waiting for me.

"Did you hear that terrible noise outside a while ago?" she asked, her voice noticeably anxious and more than a little suspicious.

"Yes, I did. I didn't know those things made any noise. Have you ever heard it before?"

"No, never. They just come up into the yard and eat. They've never done anything like that before. Did you and Charles do something to them? Sometimes Charles thinks he's still in the army, you know."

I ignored her question, not wanting to lie to her but not wanting to tell her the truth either. "This is what worries me, Aunt May. I don't think it's safe for you to be here by yourself anymore."

"Oh that's nonsense. I've done just fine here all these years. Besides, I'm not going to let a bunch of big brown blobs chase me out of my own house. GCR will come up with something to get rid of those things, you'll see."

Aunt May was getting defensive. I had spoken my piece and all I could hope for was that she would give it some thought. I picked up the teapot and poured myself a cup. My senses welcomed the flavor of the tea, my mouth still tasting foul from Charles' whiskey. We changed the subject and the rest of the evening was spent watching TV.

My presence here took Aunt May's mind off of the sewer and its malevolent tenants. But I couldn't get them out of my mind. I kept thinking about how that one reacted when we caught it. And I couldn't help but wonder if they were modifying themselves at this very moment to retaliate for what Charles and I had done.

It was about ten thirty the next morning when I put a load of my dirty clothes into the washing machine. Aunt May had gone down the street to check on Mrs. Fields, an elderly friend of hers who had fallen ill. I loaded the washer and closed the lid as it filled with water. Finding myself with a little time on my hands, my eyes drifted down to a stack of newspapers on the floor next to my left foot. I bent down and grabbed the top one, which was today's paper, still in its plastic wrapper. I tore through the plastic and slapped it down on the washing machine.

I'd forgotten how stereo-typically small town the local paper was. Most of the stories

were of local people and events seemingly inconsequential to anyone but those being written about.

I was working my way, as I always did for some reason, from the back page to the front. On page three, I saw a column headed ‘GCR, cont’d’. I flipped the paper over to the front page. There was a piece in bold print. The headline read, ‘GCR, Issues Special Instructions’. Aunt May hadn’t bothered to read the paper this morning, probably because she went to see Mrs. Fields. I folded it up in half and began to read.

The purpose of this article is to bring you up to date on what we have learned thus far about the inhabitants of our storm sewers. Since the letter we sent out to the residents of this city, we have become a great deal more familiar with, and have a much greater understanding of these organisms.

After much research and testing we have determined them to be completely harmless. It is also our opinion that they have evolved as far as their metabolism will allow. It is therefore our recommendation that you suspend feeding these organisms as of tonight. We calculate that total extinction will occur in a matter of days.

Again we apologize for any inconvenience and would like to thank you for your cooperation. We’re certain that if we all continue to work together, we can bring an end to this dilemma that has plagued our community far too long.

I sat the paper down on the washing machine. My suspicions were beginning to be confirmed. I doubted GCR’s sincerity ever since I read the letter Aunt May got from them.

How did they catch one of those things I wondered? Our attempts last night could have had serious consequences, and they’re trying to tell us that those things are harmless. It was obvious that there was much more here than we were being told.

I wondered if Charles had read this yet. Then it occurred to me that he didn’t take the local newspaper. He considered it to be little more than propaganda, advancing notions to which he did not subscribe.

I pushed the back door open and stepped outside. Charles was working in his vegetable garden. I walked over to the fence and called his name. He looked up and smiled.

“Charles, there’s something here I think you need to read.”

He looked at the newspaper I held in my hand. “I quit reading that rag a long time ago,” he scoffed, and then re-focused his attentions on his garden.

“Well I think you’d better read this.”

He ignored me for a few seconds more, then realizing that I was not going away, he walked over to the fence. I handed him the paper opened to the article. As he took it, his expression was telling me, ‘I’m just doing this for your benefit’.

It took him a few minutes to read the article. The look on his face told what he was reading as he read it. When he finished, he folded up the newspaper and rested it on the top of the fence.

“Well now,” he said, his tone skeptical, “this is inconsistent with our little exercise last night, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is. I strongly doubt that any research was done at all. You saw how those things went nuts when we snatched one of them. I think they’re a lot more developed than we are being led to believe.”

“I guess we’ll find out tonight, won’t we?” Charles picked up the newspaper and slapped it back into my hand.

“So what are you going to do?” I asked.

“I guess I’m not going to feed them any more.”

“What? Do you really believe that crap in the paper?”

“No, but I don’t want hundreds of those things in my yard just because I’m the only one feeding them. We don’t have much choice here. Besides, it’s the only way to find out if what they’re saying is true, isn’t it?”

“I suppose you’re right.” I admitted, looking down the driveway towards the street. “I guess starting tonight they’re on a diet.”

I had decided to take Aunt May out to dinner, something she never did for herself. I let her pick the restaurant, a quiet little Italian place close to down town. After the meal, we enjoyed a cup of coffee. I knew something was on her mind, it had been all evening. As we talked, I began to understand what it was.

“You’ve spent a lot of time with Charles lately. I didn’t realize you two were such good friends.” There was just a hint of animosity in her voice.

“We’re not, really,” I said casually in my own defense. “He had some ideas about your ‘after dark visitors’ and asked for my help to test a theory.”

“I figured that’s what it was,” aunt May admitted. “He shouldn’t be doing that. We’re supposed to feed them and leave them alone. He should know better.”

“Aunt May, those things are getting larger and there are more of them than I think you realize. That’s why I came back. I want you to leave here, at least until something has been done to get rid of them.”

“GCR is working on that very problem,” she answered, trying desperately to convince me. “You just have to have a little faith. Your uncle worked there for almost forty years. They’re a good company. They’ll find a way to solve this problem.”

I had subconsciously never made the connection between Uncle Gordon and these ‘things’. I knew he worked there; three quarters of the town worked there. It was one of the few places to work back then. Uncle Gordon worked in a completely different part of the company than the hourly workers. His work dealt more with creating better headache remedies and cold medicines. He never talked much about what he did though. He was so quiet and serious, and Aunt May was always so much fun, that we never really spent much time with him. I quite honestly never made a connection between him and these things. I could never have believed there to be one.

I quickly changed the subject, knowing what I had to do, and ended the evening on a happier note.

It was eleven thirty before Aunt May finally went to bed. I lay in my room starrng at the ceiling, listening for her footsteps to make their way up the stairs. After giving her sufficient time to fall asleep, I got up and put my slippers on. I picked up the flashlight I had brought with me from the kitchen and carefully opened the door.

The hallway was dark and quiet. Aunt May’s door was open. Her deep, rhythmic breathing told me she was soundly asleep. I tiptoed past her room and down to the far end of the hall.

The attic door didn’t look as if it had been opened in quite some time. There was some hangers dangling from the knob, and a small table in the corner limited the door’s swing. I managed to get it opened just enough to slip through and up the steep, narrow flight of steps. I felt along the walls for a switch, but found none.

I turned the flashlight on and scanned the dark attic. There was a light on the ceiling with a long string hanging from the pull chain. I walked over to it and turned it on. The bulb was dim

but it did provide enough light for me to see.

Wedged between an old floor lamp and a chest full of fifties looking children's toys, was a box labeled 'GCR'.

I took the lid from the box and tossed it aside. It was full of file folders. There were so many of them and they were packed so tightly that I couldn't read the labels, so I grabbed a handful and jerked them out of the box. They were heavier than I thought, and they fell from my hand and scattered across the attic floor. One by one I picked them up, reading the tab on each one as I added it to the pile. I paused at one marked 'Samson Project'. I flipped it open. There were no official documents in the file, only hand written notes made by Uncle Gordon, probably right here in this house. There was a bulge on the center of the folder. I shuffled through the pages and came to a small black soft covered ledger type book with a rubber band around it. I slid the rubber band over the top of the book and opened it up. It appeared to be a hand written diary that Uncle Gordon had kept.

Sliding back, I leaned against a large box. With the flashlight wedged under my arm, I began to read. The top of the page was dated 3/14/82.

In light of our work with enzyme reproduction, GCR management, at the request of the military, has directed us to develop an enzyme with specific characteristics. The primary characteristic would be its ability to evolve or modify itself from the standpoint of adaptability. The ultimate purpose of this project is to introduce this enzyme into the human circulatory system and thus develop a soldier that possesses the physical and biological ability to adapt himself to his surroundings, food supply and more specifically, to the capacity and strength of his adversary.

To summarize, we have been asked to produce an enzyme which, when confronted with the threat of extinction, will rapidly evolve to overcome and survive, regardless of the circumstances. We have been asked to create something that cannot be destroyed.

I had no idea Uncle Gordon was involved with anything on this level. All he ever talked about to me was making a better nasal spray or developing a new headache remedy.

The diary chronicled his work throughout the following three months. Much of it was chemical formulas which I would have better understood had I paid more attention in chemistry class.

I closed the diary and replaced the rubber band. It slid back into the groove that it had

formed from years of sitting undisturbed in the folder. I dropped it back into the file folder and began looking at the loose pages of notes that remained. They were paper-clipped together at the top left corner.

There were countless pages of formulas that meant nothing to me. There were also drawings of chemical compounds and diagrams that made even less sense. Uncle Gordon's handwriting became more difficult to read as the pages progressed. It began to look like that of a troubled man, vastly different from his typically methodical and precise writing.

The pages of scientific vernacular were followed by a two-page summary labeled, 'Progress To Date'. It was dated 6/23/83.

I began to read. Most of the summary briefly outlined his work from its inception to the date on the top of the page. Although most of this was written more scientifically than I was able to comprehend, the last paragraph I understood all too well. It was not written in any scientific dialect. My heart began to pound as the last two paragraphs made the last six years abundantly clear.

To conclude, I am compelled to believe that the risks we are taking with this enzyme far outweigh the benefits. Although it does display some of the qualities we had hoped to achieve, the potential for the organism to progress beyond the point of both our, and your expectations, remains great. Based on the data we have collected to this point, it is my opinion that any organism produced by this enzyme will evolve irreversibly until such time as no further obstacles are left to its existence. The uncontrollable variable here is what it perceives to be an obstacle.

I therefore respectfully submit that the project be discontinued immediately, and the enzymes destroyed before they reach the point at which destruction is not possible.

This was the last page of the file.

As I sat dumbfounded at what I had just read, I glanced to my right. Aunt May stood expressionless at the top of the attic stairs. For a long second, neither of us spoke. I felt compelled to break the silence.

"Have you read this?" I asked, holding up the file.

"I have," she answered, her voice void of emotion, "years ago."

"Well it's clear to me that the results of this experiment are living in the sewers today."

Aunt May's eyes drifted downwards almost as if she herself were responsible in some way.

“It really wasn’t intentional on the part of GCR,” she confessed. “After your uncle submitted his report to the government, the project was canceled. The enzymes were collected and placed in a special chamber for destruction. A chemical was introduced to kill them. After a sufficient amount of time, the waste material was pumped into the sewer.”

“But they weren’t dead, were they?” I asked.

Aunt May struggled with her answer. “The chemical should have destroyed them. No one knew that they had progressed as far as they had. If they did, they would never have flushed them into the sewer.” Taking a step towards an old wooden crate she sat down and continued.

“They thrived in the sewers for months. The city officials actually thought them to be beneficial because they eliminated virtually all of the bacteria in the entire sewer system. As they did, they began to grow and multiply. Soon their appetites surpassed the rate at which the bacteria grew. So they left the sewers and adapted themselves just like the letter from GCR said. We’ve been feeding them ever since.”

“But Aunt May, we were told to stop feeding them tonight. Didn’t you read it in the paper?”

Aunt May looked at me in horror. “Didn’t you put any vegetables out tonight?”

“No, the newspaper said not to. It came directly from GCR. No one is feeding them tonight.”

“I should have asked you,” she said aloud to herself. Looking nervously around, her voice became panicked. “You’ve been doing it for me every night since you got here so I’d forgotten about it.”

She looked down at her watch, then over at a small window facing the street. She hurried over to it. I jumped up and followed close behind.

The front yard of virtually every house was littered with the vile, slithering creatures. They were moving around savagely as if angered by the absence of food that had sustained them all these years. As we watched, their activity began to subside until one by one they all became motionless; lifeless. It was an eerie sight. The only signs of life at all were those two stray cats that roamed the street each night.

For a brief and indescribable moment, I actually believed that those things might finally have died. They lay lifeless in the dirt. My heart pounded in anticipation. The sight of them all lying there inanimately prompted me to wonder how we would dispose of them. The stray cats

wandered indiscriminately among them. My eyes scanned the landscape, my hopes still escalated. I looked over at Aunt May. Her eyes bore the look of impending doom. I stared at her curiously for a moment until I saw a sudden change in her expression. I looked back out the window. My hopes were shattered as one of the lifeless creatures in front of her house began to move, slowly at first, as if it were re-learning how. It moved differently than before. It appeared quicker, more agile, and more aggressive.

One by one they all began to move. Their actions were slow and intentional at first, as if they were discovering each movement for the first time. But within minutes every last one of the damned things had come back to life.

By this time, one of the two stray cats had wandered into Aunt May's front yard. They had co-existed for months, maybe years, with these things and as such were not intimidated by them. But that was about to change. As one of the cats neared one of them, it was attacked. The now carnivorous beast lunged, landing on top of the cat leaving only its head and front feet exposed. The cat fought furiously to escape, but was slowly drawn under the creature's heavy brown mass. It twitched violently as it struggled to digest the cat. Then, as quickly as it began, it was over. The cat was gone.

I turned to Aunt May. "It's happened, hasn't it?"

She nodded, unable, or unwilling to speak.

The creatures scurried about, frantically looking for food. They began to excavate the front yard, unearthing worms and other bugs that lived under the ground.

One of them began to slither up the trunk of a tree having sensed the presence of a squirrel. But there wasn't much to eat on this new menu. The occasional rat or mouse, or a bird or squirrel every now and then was all. And when they're all gone, what would be next? That was what bothered me the most. It was obvious that GCR, for whatever reason, was wrong.

Aunt May slowly turned and walked away from the window. I got the feeling that she knew more about all of this than she was telling me. I looked back out the window. The second stray cat was nowhere in sight while the predators were all making their way back into the sewers.

My mind was reeling with questions. Could they adapt themselves to the point that they did not require nourishment? Could they only make one evolution in a given period of time? Was the daylight something that they could not overcome? I had no answers, but I knew that

someone out there did.

Aunt May had gone downstairs and was sitting in the dark at the kitchen table. I joined her, sitting down in the chair opposite her. It took a while, but she finally spoke.

“It killed him you know.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, reaching for her hand to comfort her.

“Your Uncle Gordon. He couldn’t cope with the fact that something he helped create was a threat instead of a benefit. He ended up taking an early retirement.” She reached up and wiped a tear from her cheek. “Every night he sat on the front porch and watched his handiwork terrorize the very people he had dedicated his life to help. All he wanted to do was create medicines to make people well. But he ended up doing exactly the opposite. So every night he would sit on that porch as if standing guard over the neighborhood. That’s where I found him one morning all those years ago, slumped over in a chair, his eyes still staring out onto the yard. Oh, they killed him alright. Perhaps not physically, but by their very existence, they killed him.”

She looked up at me through her tears. “Maybe now you understand why I can’t leave this place. Not now. Not until this is over.”

I looked at her, fighting back my own tears. My resolve to end this had never been stronger. My will was quickly transcending determination and becoming rage. But I maintained my composure and comforted Aunt May, saving my wrath for a time when it could be more constructively spent.

I made us some tea and we talked a while longer. It took about an hour before Aunt May decided to go back to bed, but by that time I was wide awake. I poured myself another cup of tea and walked out onto the front porch.

The night air was cool and the silence flagrant as if life itself was allowed to exist now that the unwelcome nocturnal visitors had temporarily departed. I sat down in a chair, possibly the very chair Uncle Gordon was sitting in when he died. Each and every house up and down the street was dark, except for the halogen lights.

Off in the distance a dull hum began to penetrate the silence. The sound grew loud for a moment, and then subsided. As it grew closer its origin became clear. It was a diesel engine.

I got up from my chair and sat my cup on the handrail before walking down the steps and out to the street. Looking down toward the end of the block, I saw headlights reflected in the haze that lingered in the cool night air. They were coming from Fisk Street, a street that crossed

West Palm. The noise from the engine grew louder as the truck got closer to the intersection. As I listened, the noise seemed to change. It began to blare in harmony, as if there were more than one truck.

I walked up the sidewalk, crouching down so as not to be so readily visible. I made my way to the corner and hid behind a large tree near the sidewalk in front of the corner house. Soon headlights began to illuminate the ground around me.

I was right. There was more than one truck. There was a convoy of trucks, eight or ten of them. The lead truck was a tandem axle tanker truck. As it drove, a man wearing a blue coveralls and a pair of black rubber boots walked next to it carrying what looked to be about a six inch hose which was connected to the belly of the tank. On the end of the hose was a valve. He appeared to be pumping some sort of liquid down into the storm sewer.

The truck drove from drain to drain, taking fifteen or twenty seconds at each one to deposit the liquid. About thirty feet behind it was another truck with a larger tank with a hose connected to the top of the tank. This hose was elongated, almost oval in shape, and much larger and more flexible. A man wearing a protective suit and face shield pushed the hose down through the drain and deep into the storm sewer. With the hose in place he walked back to the truck and pushed a lever on a lighted control panel mounted on the back of the tank. The noise changed pitch and became louder.

As I watched, the hose began to shake. It thumped and shook, as if it were sucking up something very heavy.

“A vacuum truck,” I said to myself. “That’s a vacuum truck.” I had seen them when I was younger. I worked on an oil-drilling rig for a short time. I knew I had seen them somewhere. The sequential vibrations in the hose could only be caused by one thing. They were sucking up those brown slimy bastards out of the storm sewer. The muffled sounds of high-pitched screams confirmed my suspicions.

But why now? I wondered. Why tell us to stop feeding them and give them the opportunity to evolve further?

The lead truck, the smaller of the pair, had stopped a ways down the street. The man walking beside it was securing the hose to the tank. When he finished, he climbed in the passenger side and the truck drove off. Another identical truck pulled immediately in front of the convoy to take its place. It was obvious to me that this had been carefully planned.

They were hauling those things somewhere and I had to find out where. It was clear that they didn't want anyone to know otherwise they'd be doing this in the daytime. Going back and getting my car was out of the question. So, I watched and waited, hoping an opportunity would present itself.

I followed the convoy from house to house as it made its way down the street. With nothing but tree trunks and light poles to hide behind, the trip was challenging to say the least. Not every yard had a tree and only every other block had a street light. Sometimes the trucks would get ahead of me and sometimes I would get ahead of them.

On the third block I made my way to a tree next to a house whose owner had filled in the yard with small chunks of white rock. There was nothing to hide behind so I would have to pass through this yard to get to the tree in the next one. There was a storm drain about ten feet ahead. As I watched, the man pumping in the liquid pulled the hose up out of the drain before the flow had completely stopped. A stream of the thick transparent solution splashed up onto the sidewalk. I watched carefully for my opportunity to get to the next tree. When it came, I dashed out, running as fast as I could down the sidewalk. As I reached the puddle of over-spray from the hose, my left foot stepped in it and I slipped and lost my balance. I used my right hand to break my fall. My palm landed right in the middle of the slimy substance that my foot had just slipped in.

Quickly regaining my balance, I headed for the tree in the next yard. As I reached it, I dropped to the ground. My palm stung for a second or two when it hit the sidewalk, but I felt nothing now. In fact I had no feeling at all in my palm. I poked and pinched it, but I could feel nothing. It was clear now what they were doing, though I was still curious as to why.

What I had slipped in back there must have been a very strong desensitizing agent. My hand was completely numb, and felt a foot thick just like my jaw feels whenever I have the misfortune of getting a filling at the dentist. And from what I was seeing, it had the same affect on the inhabitants of the sewer. There was no telling how many of them there were in the back of those trucks.

I stood up, intimidated by the glare of the approaching headlights, and maneuvered myself around the tree as the large vacuum truck pulled to a stop less than four feet in front of me. The giant hose was lowered into the sewer and soon the bumping and splashing began again.

With the ladder of this truck so close, I took advantage of the opportunity. I stepped out and grabbed it, pulling myself up and quickly climbing to the top of the tank. There was a catwalk that ran the length of it. Taking just enough steps to keep my feet from hanging off the end, I laid down on my stomach, my face pressed against the cold metal. The giant tank vibrated under me as it began to fill.

After a few minutes, the catwalk became still. I could hear the tech coiling the hose. The truck was full. I reached my hands out in front of me as the truck began to move. After only a few turns, we were out of Aunt May's neighborhood.

We drove through town, passing other trucks along the way as they headed back from where ever it was that they had taken their loads. Each time we passed another one, I noticed something else, like the heavily tinted windows and the total lack of markings of any kind on the doors of the trucks that were transporting these bastards. There should at least be a fuel permit tag on the trucks, but there was nothing.

The driver began to downshift some fifteen minutes after the trip began. As the truck slowed, the strong odor lingering in the air told me where we were. The darkness was beginning to give way to a hazy blue light. We coasted to a stop, waiting momentarily as an electronic gate was opened. We passed through and it closed immediately behind us. I knew where we were. We were at GCR.

The truck coasted between the buildings making its way to the very back of the compound then slowed again, passing through a large door and into a gigantic warehouse. The doors were electronically closed once we were inside. The truck rolled slowly down a narrow corridor bordered by rows of metal shelves and stacks of wooden crates. I could feel the engine lag as the driver prepared to stop.

I didn't want to be on the truck when it came to a stop so I maneuvered myself to the end of the catwalk and down the ladder. I felt the driver apply the brakes and seized the opportunity. I let go of the ladder, pushing myself back from the truck. My feet landed hard but quickly slipped out from under me on the smooth painted concrete floor. I broke my fall with both hands, but only one of them felt any pain.

I slipped in between two stacks of crates and hid. I heard the rush of air from the brakes as the driver brought the truck to a stop, then shut the engine off. For a moment, the warehouse was deathly silent. I was sure someone seen or heard me. I held my breath as my heart pounded

in my chest. After a few seconds, the continued silence convinced me otherwise.

Off in the distance I could hear voices but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I had to find a better vantage point.

The crates around me were not all the same size, so they were not difficult to navigate. I climbed carefully one step at a time, pausing to make sure my previous step hadn't given me away.

When I reached the top, I realized I was closer to the voices than I thought. I snaked my way across the top of the crates and eased myself over to the edge. The back of the truck was about twenty feet in front of me. On either side of it was what looked like two enormous swimming pools. They were much larger than the average backyard pool, and deeper as well as I could not see to the bottom. A man wearing a white technician's coat was connecting a hose to the bottom side of the tanker. Another technician drug the hose to the edge of the pool. It hung there only inches from the surface of the water. Two other men in uniform stood as guards on each side of the hose. They were each holding what looked like some sort of electronic stun weapon. A flexible cable connected the weapon to a battery pack strapped to each of their backs. They clutched them as if expecting the worst. Their faces mirrored their anxiety.

One of the technicians shouted "Clear."

The guards backed a step away from the edge of the water. The valve was opened. One by one, the giant brown creatures that had been sucked out of the sewers were spewed into the giant pool. They bobbed up and down in the water savagely, showing little evidence of the anesthesia they had been subjected to.

This had not been a good night for them. Not only had they missed supper, but they had been kidnapped as well. For the first time these things actually looked helpless. But despite my admittedly mediocre attempt, I was unable to muster up much sympathy for them.

After only three or four minutes, the splashing stopped. The two guards seemed to heave a collective sigh of relief and one of the two men holding the hose stood up and walked over to the truck. From a compartment near the valve on the underside of the tank, he removed a rubber mallet. Then, starting at the rear of the tanker, he began pounding the side as he walked, working his way up to the front. He walked the entire length of the tanker, striking the side of it every couple of feet with the mallet. When he reached the front of the tank and having satisfied himself that no more of them remained, he walked back to the valve and closed it.

His co-worker, who had straddled the end of the hose and sat on it to keep it in place over the edge of the pool, then stood up. He pulled the hose over to the side of the tanker and the two hoisted it up onto its rack. The entire procedure took less than five minutes. The driver, who remained in the truck during the unloading, started the engine. Everyone appeared to be at ease once again as the truck slowly backed down the aisle and out the doors. I looked over my shoulder and saw the headlights of another tanker waiting to unload its aberrant cargo.

The next tanker pulled into the same spot vacated by the last and immediately the expulsion began. It took about ten minutes this time to completely empty the truck. The creatures seemed more agitated than they did on the previous load; more enraged. They didn't simply spill out of the hose as they did before. It looked as if they were fighting to stay inside the tanker.

After the strained departure of the final occupant, one of the technicians again got up and headed for the truck. The other, instead of remaining on the end of the hose to secure it as he had done previously, relaxed, dropping to the floor from exhaustion. His partner by this time had removed the mallet and begun pounding his way down the side of the tanker.

One of the guards had left to get a drink of water from the water fountain. The other had lit a cigarette and was staring up at the ceiling, his weapon dangling loosely over his shoulder. The hour was late and their fatigue was evident. They had obviously been doing this all night.

About a third of his way down the length of the tank, the technician swinging the rubber mallet inadvertently smashed his knee against the rack that held the spare tires. He doubled over in pain, obviously having struck this very same knee more than a once tonight. Unable to control his rage, he straightened up and walloped the side of the tank with the mallet, putting a noticeable dent in it and providing more than enough reason for one last straggler to slide out and down the hose. From my vantage point on top of the boxes, I saw the hose pitch to one side as the creature made its way through it towards the pool, but no one was holding the end of it. As it neared the end of the hose, it began to thrash about wildly, as if it knew what was waiting for it. The movement caused the hose to inch away from the edge of the pool. The violent struggle caught the attention of both the guard and the technician, who was supposed to be holding on to the end of the hose.

I'll never forget the look of sheer terror on both of their faces. It was as if things were happening in slow motion. The end of the hose was now pointed directly at the guard. He

reached behind him for his weapon, but before he could get it off of his shoulder, the creature spilled out the end of the hose and slid across the floor. Unable to get out of its way, the guard was bowled over and fell soundly to the concrete. In an instant the man's feet were covered to his knees by the ravenous brown mass.

The guard screamed as a boy with his fingers caught in the car door. His feet were unable to move under the weight of his attacker. By this time the other guard was running at full stride towards his partner with his weapon drawn. When he reached the edge of the pool, his partner was covered to the waist by the incensed creature. He quickly placed the end of the weapon in the middle of its back and squeezed the trigger. The current passed through it with virtually no effect. He shocked it again, and again, no reaction.

The man's chest was now being drawn under. The guard turned the stun gun around in his hands and began pounding the vile brown flesh that was killing his partner. He yelled obscenities as his determination was overtaken by panic, then rage.

The two technicians ran over to him and restrained him.

"It's too late," one of them shouted, "he's already gone."

The guard struggled in the grip of the two men who held his arms, as he watched his partner now barely conscious, disappear, leaving only a puddle of lucid slime on the floor. The creature sat motionless for a few seconds, as if taking time to digest its meal. It then slowly slid across the floor and into the pool, leaving behind a weapon, a soiled and tattered security uniform and a small puddle of blood.

"That's it," one of the technician's shouted, "we're doing it right now." He stormed angrily back into a small office on the opposite side of the pool, returning almost immediately with a flask of red colored liquid. The truck driver, who had climbed out of his truck in the midst of the commotion, slowly approached the pool. He watched with anticipation, as did I, while the technician walked up to the edge of the pool and without ceremony, emptied the contents of the flask into it.

A small patch of the water became brightly discolored for a short time, and then the entire pool began to churn as the creatures splashed about maniacally. My eyes remained fixed on the pool for several minutes as the surface of the water became white with froth. It was almost five minutes before the water began to calm. As the water returned to normal I saw a sea of brown tissue floating lifelessly on its surface. The guard stepped up to the edge of the pool and soundly

struck one of the inanimate blobs with the butt of his weapon, confirming my suspicions that they were in fact dead.

“Not so tough now, are you?” the guard scoffed.

As he spoke, an overhead crane began maneuvering into place above the pool, no doubt to remove their lifeless bodies.

I began to feel a relief that had been many years coming. It was finally over. These things had been a part of life in this small community for so many years that I was having a difficult time comprehending that fact. I felt a little guilty for suspecting GCR was acting in its own best interests instead of those of the people of Gorland Creek. I was clearly wrong, and gratefully so.

“I’d better get out of here,” the truck driver moaned, looking down at his watch. The vacuum truck’s engine started. Seeing all I felt I needed to see, I slid back across the top of the crates from which I had been watching. Climbing down was easier than climbing up. Maybe it had something to do with knowing that the nightmare was about to be over. My feet touched the floor as the rear of the tank passed by the end of the isle. I ran towards it and without slowing, leapt onto the narrow platform that accommodated the hose. Quickly I made my way toward the back of the truck and climbed the ladder to the catwalk on top of the tank.

I dropped to my belly just in time to hear the technician yelling frantically at the driver. The truck stopped abruptly and the driver switched off the engine. I knew for sure someone had seen me. My heart pounded as I lay as flat against the catwalk.

The technician ran over to the driver’s side door. The driver opened his door and stepped out.

“What’s the matter?” he yelled, obviously irritated by this delay.

“The last truck just called in. We’ve got them all. Guess you can call it a night.”

“That’s fine with me.” The driver confessed. “I can hardly keep my eyes open anyway.”

The technician began to walk away from the truck as I heaved an audible sigh of relief. He was stopped though, by the driver.

“Hey” he shouted sarcastically, “if I brought my ex-wife down here and tossed her in there, would she die as fast as they did?”

I smiled a little at his humor, though I wondered how serious he may have been.

“They’re not dead.” the technician stated casually.

My eyes darted back over to the pool where the motionless creatures floated as driftwood in the surf.

“They sure look dead to me,” the driver observed.

“That’s why you’re a truck driver and I’m a scientist,” the tech said sarcastically.

“Believe me, they’re not dead.”

I inched myself forward on the catwalk, hoping there was an explanation for what I had just heard.

“They’re anesthetized.”

The driver looked curiously at him, his limited education contributing to his confusion.

“Asleep,” the technician explained impatiently.

“Oh, so you’re putting them to sleep before you kill them, eh?”

“We’re not killing them,” the technician replied, his tone becoming somewhat caustic.

“This is simply the next phase in their development.”

“But we were told to gather them up so they could be brought here and destroyed. Are you telling me that’s not the truth?”

The technician took off his glasses. “Congratulations, you’ve just learned the difference between truth and reality. Although they are both factual to a degree, they’re both subjective.”

“Then explain reality to me,” the driver demanded as he stepped down from the cab of the truck and grabbed the technician by his lab coat.

“Take it easy,” the tech responded nervously. “I’d love to tell you but I can’t. It’s need-to-know, you know what I mean?”

The driver tightened his grip on the tech’s coat, clenching his fist just inched from the technician’s face. “Well, for the sake of your face, I need to know. You know what I mean?”

“Alright, alright. Let go of me and I’ll tell you.”

The driver loosened his grip. The tech straightened his coat and tried to regain his composure.

“While it’s true these things weren’t really an accident, they were a very expensive failure. At that point, management split us up into two groups; one to find a way to destroy them and the other to find a profitable use for them. Whichever group came up with their solution first would be given a budget for development. Well, we have found a use for them, and a very profitable one.”

“What could anybody possibly use those things for?” the driver asked mockingly as he looked over at the floating mass of brown, lifeless tissue.

“What you’re looking at is the next generation of mercenary. The most perfect form of destruction ever created. They’re virtually indestructible, and they have just one purpose in their lives, that is to satisfy their ravenous appetites. Tonight we allowed them to become carnivorous. This was the last stage in their evolution. Now they’re ready.”

“If this was your plan, why did you wait so long? Why didn’t you make them meat eaters’ years ago and save us all the trouble of putting up with them as long as we did?”

“It wasn’t them becoming carnivores that we’ve been working on all this time, it was this.” The tech raised the empty flask he was holding in his hand. “It took years to develop a formula that would allow us to control their development and their evolution. Without that control they were essentially a worthless potentially devastating threat. The control formula allows them to be temporarily neutralized, as they are right now.”

“So what’s to stop them from becoming immune to the neutralizing agent?” the driver questioned.

“Our research suggests that they won’t.”

“Then you’re not sure?”

“Yes we are sure. In fact we’re sure enough to start the bidding at fifty thousand dollars a piece. There are mercenaries and military leaders flying here in the morning from all over the world with their checkbooks open. Now, if you have no other questions, I have work to finish.”

The technician turned and walked back towards the pool as the driver, muttering obscenities under his breath, climbed back into the truck and started it. I tightened my grip on the catwalk though numbed from this revelation, and feeling powerless to do anything about it. I suspected all along that this whole thing was more than just a mistake. I realized now that it was naive to think that GCR would invest the amount of time and money it did in this project without expecting some sort of return. The terror may be over for the residents of Gorland Creek, but it was about to begin in some other poor, unsuspecting place.

The truck drove out of the warehouse and circled around to the main gates then out onto the road. As I watched the GCR compound growing smaller behind me, I wondered if they had any idea of the toll their little experiment had taken on the community or more importantly, had they any concept of the consequences of their creation.

We slowed to a stop at a red light about three blocks from Aunt May's street. I took the opportunity to climb down the ladder and jump off. I watched the truck pull away as I slowly stepped up the curb to the sidewalk. I should feel some sense of comfort in the fact that the town would finally get back to normal. But the distrust I held for GCR suppressed any satisfaction I may have felt.

What would the next experiment be? How safe was Aunt May living in this town even without the nocturnal visitors? For some odd reason, I felt little sense of victory.

I rounded the corner and headed down West Palm towards Aunt May's house. The sun was beginning to rise, creating a gentle amber glow on the horizon. Off in the distance I heard the faint pattering of a motor scooter. As the sound grew louder, the paperboy, a young lad of maybe fifteen, spiraled the morning paper into Aunt May's yard. It came to rest at the bottom of the porch steps. He looked at me strangely as he passed by, obviously not used to seeing anyone out at this time of the morning. I smiled at him, and then walked over to the paper that lay in front of the house. I bent over and picked it up. As I pulled off the plastic cover, the headline appeared. 'Sewer Inhabitants Evicted; Nightmare Over.'

The article went on to explain how GCR had introduced a chemical into the sewer system which made the organisms very aggressive. This coupled with the fact that they were not fed last night caused them to attack one another. It explained further that the trucks roaming the streets during the night were merely extracting dead bodies from the sewers.

It was all so neat, and all so false.

I walked up the porch steps and picked up the half-filled cup of tea I had left on the handrail a few hours ago. As I poured it out on the ground, the front door opened and Aunt May stepped out onto the porch.

"Where have you been? I've been worried about you."

"I couldn't sleep so I went for a walk," I answered.

As I spoke, her eyes caught the headline in the newspaper I was holding in my hand. She made her way quickly down the porch steps and grabbed it from me. I watched her expression change from concern to gratitude. Slowly her eyes looked up at me from the paper. She asked the question without speaking.

"Yes," I said, "it's over."

She folded the paper, her eyes drifting out over the front yard. I knew what she was

thinking. I let her embrace those thoughts for a few moments.

“Come on inside,” I said, putting my arm around her shoulder. “I’ll cook us some breakfast.”

As we walked across the porch and through the front door, an unusual sound for these parts was growing louder. Aunt May poked her head back out the door just in time to see a helicopter fly over the house.

“I wonder where he’s going?” she said, looking at me as if I should know.

I offered no answer. I had already lied to her enough.

The whine of the helicopter faded into silence, and the return to normal, whatever normal may be, had begun.