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***THE CORPSE
FACTORY***

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The Corpse Factory

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I. — THE KNIFE FROM NOWHERE

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THE road was wide and well-surfaced, as it would have to be for the trucks I had seen back there in Roton, the huge green tank trucks that brought their loads of Neosite fifty miles to the nearest railroad. But on either side the light of my headlamps sprayed out into a blank nothingness, and when the way curved their beam swept over flat swampland, vacant and desolate. The humid air, too, was heavy with a rank miasma, an odor of putrescence. I felt seeping away from me the elation with which I had started toward the biggest job of my career, the superintendency, no less, of the plant whose cheap and super-efficient product was driving other motor fuels from the market. I tried to shrug off my growing depression, but it weighed on me more and more heavily as the car that had been waiting for me at the shipping point bored on into the night.

The highway lifted in a gradual rise whose crest was sharply defined against the pale glimmer of an overcast sky. A chemical engineer should have no imagination, but I had to fight off an eerie feeling that there, just ahead, was the end of the world; that beyond was sheer emptiness. My skin prickled as I saw a formless black excrescence on that ominous skyline, a black and brooding blob of too solid shadow...Then I neared and the anomalous bulk took on human contour. Almost involuntarily my foot lifted from the gas pedal, shifted to the brake and slowed the car to a stop. I leaned out.

The fellow my headlight revealed was seated on the ground at the roadside, his long thin arms clasped around gangling, up-bent knees. I judged him to be young, about eighteen, but there was ageless vapidness in his leathery, hollow-cheeked face, dull incuriousness that was not youthful in the lackluster eyes with which he met my own. I could read not even the intelligence of an animal in his countenance; somehow it was flat and featureless as the very swamp from which he appeared to have sprung.

"How far to Newville, buddy?" I called to explain my halt.

He looked at me, unblinking. He didn't reply, but the narrow rim of his forehead wrinkled under his stringy, unkempt black hair. I repeated my question in a louder voice, as if mere noise could penetrate his stupidity.

"Five er ten mile." His husky voice was quite inflectionless and his lips scarcely moved.

"Thanks." I couldn't keep the sarcasm out of my tone. "That tells me a lot." I might as well have spared the effort; he seemed already to have forgotten my presence, was staring unseeingly through my car. I trod on the starter button...

Then, from somewhere beyond, a moaning wail sounded—low, muffled, but vibrant with an agony that was somehow uncomprehending. Like the plaint of a hurt cat it welled in a crescendo of suffering.

"Good Lord!" I gritted. "What's that?"

"Mom."

The youth showed not the slightest flicker of interest.

I tried to peer into the blank wall of darkness past my headlights. "What's the matter with her?" I asked.

"Nothin'. It's 'Lije. He's dyin'."

"'Lije?"

"M' brother." There was a slight tinge of expression in his tone this time, of exasperation at my continued questioning.

I switched the car lights off. The wail came again—unutterably sorrowful. The blackness faded. I saw a bulk of darker shadow, ahead and to the left of the road, and a pale rectangle of flickering yellow luminance that might be a window. "Maybe she needs help," I said sharply. "A doctor."

"Ain't no doctor kin stop the Peelin's. Ain't no doctor nigher'n Roton anyways." He sat like a clod, motionless, uncaring.

I slid to the ground and made for what was now defined as a crazily leaning hut. Maybe I wouldn't do any good, but I couldn't go on without finding out. I'm not built that way.

My feet sank into soft, sucking mire, found a narrow path of muddy but firmer ground. There was no lock on the drab door of unpainted rough boards and I pulled it open. A stench of decayed food, human filth, was febrilely warm around me. There was another scent, pungent and foul, that I could not identify. I stepped into a cluttered, grimy room where one feeble candle flickered on a debris strewn table. The beastlike wailing twisted me to a corner.

The woman was on her knees, crouched over what was at my first glance a flat pile of dirt-colored rags. The garment she wore was pulled tight over the abject curve of her back and I could trace the humped line of her spine showing through. Her hair was scraggly, streaked black and gray; and broken, black-rimmed fingertips curved claw-like over the thin lines of her shoulders.

Apparently she had not heard my entrance. I moved toward her, my lips parting to speak. And froze as I glimpsed that over which she moaned.

It wasn't a face on that pallet of rags, not such a face as even the foulest of nightmares could present. Nor was it a skull. That at least is bone, clean and dead. This was stripped clear of flesh, except where some blackened shreds still clung, but the bared muscles were there, and white threadings of nerves, and there was a quivering of agonized life over the blurred surface. The eyelids were gone. From the dark pits they should have covered, sightless balls stared a chalky, translucent white. Seared lip edges were eaten raggedly away from a yellow, rotted grin. And the head had neither nose nor ears. The rest, mercifully, was hidden from sight by a dirt-crust, tattered blanket.

I must have made some sound, though I was not aware of it, for the woman turned. Had it not been for the other, her countenance might have inspired horror in me, so lined with suffering, so emaciated it was. Strands of bedraggled, grimy hair fell across her brow, and from behind them her eyes glittered, rat-like. Something like a rat, too, there was in the furtive startlement of her expression, in the snarling lift of her thin lips.

"What d'yer want?" she squeaked.

"Your son told me you were in trouble," I managed to speak—steadily, I hoped. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Who're you?"

"Thorndal's new superintendent. I was—" The blaze of hate in her face cut me off. She leaped to her feet and shrieked: