

David Ambrose

The Man who turned into Himself – Chapter 1

I lay in bed, listening to the silence of the house and trying to recall the dream that had woken me with such a start of fear. I remembered running through wide, battle-scarred streets under a flame-filled sky, but whatever demons had been pursuing me had already slipped back over the horizon into unconsciousness. Anne was breathing softly at my side, miraculously undisturbed by the twisting and turning I must have been doing. I could tell I wasn't going to get back to sleep easily, so I slid out from under the covers, pulled on my slippers and robe, and padded downstairs.

There was still a smell of wood smoke in the living room, but all that remained of the evening's log fire was a pile of white ash in the hearth. I pulled back a curtain and looked out. It was a clear Connecticut night with a touch of frost under a nearly full moon. In that light our rambling, half-wild garden became a place of secrets and enchantment, conjuring up memories of the cozy, old-fashioned children's stories that my grandparents used to read to me at Christmas around a roaring fire in their Devon farmhouse.

My father worked for a firm of heating engineers in London. When I was ten, he was offered a job in Philadelphia. Neither he nor my mother ever really settled there, and as soon as he retired they moved back to the south of England, which they still thought of as home. But by that time I was at Princeton, and in love.

Anne and I lived together for almost four years before we married, then waited another two years before deciding that we could afford to start a family. Charlie was just a few months old when we found this house. We had both loved it from the moment we first saw it. We wanted more children and lots of space to have them. We also wanted to live outside the city. The loan we took out was bigger than we could afford, but we gambled on being able to make the payments, and so far we had been lucky. In fact I sometimes felt that we were luckier, and happier, than we had any right to expect. Now Anne was pregnant again, just as we'd planned.

I shivered, suddenly aware of the cold, and let the curtain fall back. Had the nightmare that woke me come from the fear that good things were given only to be taken away, as though by some sadistic Manichaen principle? Did I really believe in that kind of a universe?

Maybe I did. Somewhere.

I switched on a lamp in a reflex effort to push these thoughts away, then debated whether to pour myself a whiskey or go through to the kitchen and make a hot cup of chocolate. I settled for the chocolate because I'd drunk enough with dinner and wanted a clear head for the morning.

As I stirred the pan on the stove I became aware of someone watching me. Anne was leaning against the door frame, arms folded, feet crossed. She wore a robe like mine. We had bought them together. Her short, dark hair was tousled and her eyes, normally wide with an expression between surprise and laughter, were sleepy.

"I'll have whatever you're having," s he said.

"I'm sorry I woke you."

"You didn't. The empty bed did." Her eyes followed me to the fridge for more milk and to the shelf for more chocolate. "What's worrying you? Are you afraid that now you've made up your mind, they're going to change theirs?"

"It's not about tomorrow," I responded, with a touch of impatience in my voice. She arched an eyebrow skeptically. "Of course not," stifling a yawn and smiling at the same time. "It's just a coincidence that you're up at 3 a.m. making yourself comfort drinks."

"Everything's set for tomorrow. The meeting's only a formality."

She came towards me, slipped her arms over my shoulders and looked into my eyes, first one then the other, the way she always did. "All I want is to be sure you're doing it because you want to, not because you think you should for me, Charlie and the bump." The "bump" was her pregnancy that didn't even show yet. She pushed it against me, rubbing softly.

"Are you accusing me of putting my family before personal preferences?"

"It's possible."

"You're calling me a wimp?"

"Yes." She pressed her face to mine as my hands slid under her robe. "Rick," she murmured, and didn't have to say any more. I hoisted her gently up and she locked her legs around my waist. Somehow I managed to switch off the stove before I carried her out. I almost tripped on her robe as she dropped it, wobbled painfully on one of Charlie's Ninja Turtles on the stairs, and gave a muffled curse as I banged my elbow on the door at the top. "It's never like this in the movies," I said, lowering her, and myself with her, to the bed.

"No," she whispered, a little breathless even though I was the one doing all the work, "there isn't room in those narrow seats."

*

Charlie woke us ten minutes before the alarm went off to say that he could hear Gummo, our Siamese cat, stuck on the roof again. I pulled on an old tracksuit and climbed into the chilly loft to let him in through a skylight. Charlie waited anxiously where I'd told him to on the landing, circled by Harpo, his mongrel terrier, who pierced the air with a repeated nervous yelp.

The cat was really freaked by something. I tried everything I knew to get him in, including coaxing, cajoling, and even having Charlie run down to get his food bowl filled with his favorite breakfast. It was no good; the wretched animal just prowled up and down the tiles, making plaintive meowing noises and staying carefully beyond my reach. I realized I was going to have to go out and get him. I hauled myself up through the skylight, inwardly reflecting that domestic bliss, like most kinds of happiness, had its shortcomings.

Climbing out onto a sloping roof of very old tiles before the overnight frost had completely thawed was not the cleverest thing I've ever done. The cat seemed to sense the danger and ran for his life, terrified that I might pick him up and then fall, still clutching him.

I don't think I would have fallen at all if the cat hadn't turned and lashed out at me, lips drawn back in a snarl and claws extended, when I went after him. I'm pretty agile and I was moving with care, but I just wasn't ready for this reaction from a cat who, I swear, spends half his life sleeping on my desk, and the other half curled up on my lap whenever I sit down to read. I cursed him, and suddenly I heard a scream. Not my voice. Anne's.

As the world began to spin, I saw her terrified face in the skylight I'd just climbed out of. Only then did I realize that the world was spinning because I was falling.

It was one of those moments where reality hangs suspended. It's not even that things happen in slow motion. They're both happening and not happening at the same time. Events are kept at arm's length by a protective barrier of shock and denial. You think thoughts you don't have time to think. You realize in a detached, purely intellectual way that something awful is happening, but without really touching you.

Then your imagination goes to work. You have a flash of yourself in a wheelchair for the rest of your life. Even worse, on your back, a quadriplegic in an orthopaedic bed.

Suddenly... I'm not absolutely sure about this, but I think I heard myself laughing. It was all too absurd to be taken seriously. It couldn't be true!

Anne's scream continued to ring in my ears as I pitched off the roof, turning in space. I could hear Charlie's cry and the dog's panicky barking in the loft behind her. But they were wrong, surely, to be alarmed. It couldn't happen. It couldn't!

I didn't know much for a while after I landed. I didn't black out, but time stopped.

Then I felt the life begin to flow back into all the parts of my body. Mentally I checked them off, one by one. Things moved. I was whole.

By the time Anne reached me I was on my feet, picking chunks of the evil-smelling compost into which I'd fallen off my tracksuit.

*

I inspected myself in the long bathroom mirror as I stepped out of the shower. I'd have a bruise or two, but nothing worse. The fact that I was in good shape, thanks to a vigorous workout several times a week, had probably helped. At least I'd landed with a certain degree of physical coordination.

How remote it seemed already, that appalling knowledge that everything hung in the balance. Suppose I'd cracked my head open? Another couple of feet either way and it would have been like a coconut against concrete. I peered into the eyes between the dark mop of hair and the white foam as I began to shave. How must brain damage feel, from the inside? You must know there's something terribly wrong, but you're not sure what. Maybe every so often you get a kind of oblique flash of the appalling truth: you're what's wrong. You're a freak, not quite human. People pity you, but above all they fear you, because you have become their nightmare.

I closed my eyes and forced myself to think of something else. Moments later I was heading downstairs for breakfast. As I entered the warm kitchen that smelled of coffee, eggs and toast, Charlie took up the refrain he had been chanting non-stop and with much hilarity ever since it happened.

"Daddy fell in the doo-doo, daddy fell in the doo-doo..!"

*

I drove down tree-lined lanes, working through the intricate network of back roads that joined the highway at the last possible point before entering the city. The radio was on, but I couldn't have told you two minutes afterwards what the headlines on the news had been. The day, which had already started out dramatically, would, if all went well, be an important one for me.

My company, Hamilton Publications Inc., had set up in business nearly six years earlier, with just myself, my assistant Marcie, and two others. Our specialist

publications ranged from a literary review to a newsletter for professional caterers. One of our earliest efforts had become a must with every wine grower on the west coast. There was a bi-monthly that no gallery owner could afford to be without. High school science departments subscribed in their thousands to "Particle/Wave", a digest and update of progress in the new physics, too simple for genuine researchers but too technical for the layman.

I or one of the team would spot what looked like a gap in the market and then check it out demographically. Nine times out of ten we came up with compelling reasons to drop the idea; but that one time out of ten would add another title to our list.

After a while total strangers started calling up or writing in with ideas. Three of them had, within weeks, found themselves allocated office space and running their own brainchild. We devised a profit share scheme so that they felt they were working as much for themselves as for the firm.

About a year ago we'd started to attract attention from the big boys. A couple of conglomerates had come sniffing around with buy-out offers, but I wasn't keen on going to work for somebody else. Essentially I'm a dabbler, an ideas man. I love nothing better than to spend days and sometimes weeks reading up on some topic that has caught my imagination. It can be nuclear physics or traffic control. I'm a kind of specialist in the eclectic; or "totally lacking in intellectual focus" as they put it in college, where I did not distinguish myself.

Anyway, the business, at the point or the plateau it had reached, was a kind of natural extension of me, one that I didn't want to give up just yet, not even in return for a lot of money.

At the same time, it might have been nice to branch out in one or two other directions. For instance, I'll tell you something that may not have occurred to you. Do you want to know how people really are? How they're feeling, what they're saying, what they really mean? If you want to know what is truly going on in the world around you, don't read anything by journalists or sociologists or any kind of analyst. Don't even talk to cab drivers.

Read the trade papers. There's one for every trade and everything that likes to call itself a profession. The boasts ring so hollow and the anxieties stare so searingly through that the truth, unspoken, hits you like a sledgehammer. The trades are the code books to what's happening and where we're going. I wanted to start my own string of them. And try something, I don't know... new.

My lawyer, Harold, had begun making inquiries about possible sources of finance, hence the meeting at the bank. Anne had made me promise to call her and report as soon as we were through. She was taking Charlie into town some time late morning for a friend's birthday party that was to begin with a movie

outing. After that she would be working at home all afternoon. She organized a charity that ran shelters for the homeless. It was unpaid work and she was fully aware that the help they offered was a drop in the ocean. She used to joke that it was a perfect job for a knee-jerk liberal: well-meaning, pious, and ultimately ineffectual. She'd been a journalist before having Charlie, a good one with a promising future. She could have gone back to it but chose not to. I think she was prouder of what she was doing than...

The sound of the horn reached me from a long, long way away. I don't know where my mind had been. Not consciously going over all the things I have just been setting down. All I know is that I suddenly seemed to come out of a daydream to find a huge truck bearing down on me, horn blaring and lights flashing.

I swung the wheel to the right, and still don't know how I managed to miss him. The car skidded and stalled and came to a halt half on and half off the road. For a while I couldn't do anything except sit there shaking and feeling a clammy, cold perspiration all over me. Eventually I pulled myself together and drove off, hunched over the wheel in fierce concentration, heart still pounding.

Even by the time I'd parked in my numbered space in the lot behind our building, I was still shaky. To miss death twice in one morning was too close for me. I had this jolt of superstition about things coming in threes. It was a few minutes before I got out of the car and headed into the building - big, square, turn-of-the-century. It closed itself around me that morning like an old friend, familiar and reassuring.

I took the elevator to the sixth floor, where we occupied half the available space. I pushed open the door with its modest logo: "Hamilton Publications Inc." Jigger, the receptionist, smiled up from her desk and the day's first cup of coffee and said good morning. I walked through to my corner office, greeting on the way the four men and two women who were in before me because they had deadlines to meet by the end of the day. The others would be in soon if they weren't tied up seeing contributors or working at home. Marcie, always knew where everybody was if I needed to talk to them.

"Harold called to ask can you pick him up at his office so you can talk on the way over." Marcie was checking off my messages with her customary efficiency.

"Okay," I said, "tell him I'll stop by at ten after."

"And he said," she gave a puzzled frown, "that I wasn't under any circumstances to let you out on the roof. What does that mean?"

I sighed. "It means that he called home before he called here." I told her the story, which kept her giggling on and off for the next twenty minutes while we dealt with the morning's mail.

*

Harold had been my best friend ever since I came to America. He had lived across the street and quickly took me under his wing, introduced me around, taught me to play baseball, and made excuses for my accent until it blended into a reasonable facsimile of his own.

Now he was a lawyer, my lawyer, and a very clever one. I trusted him with everything, and he'd never let me down. He dreamed up contracts which were impeccably concise, yet loose enough to let the independent and sometimes eccentric people I worked with feel at ease. He'd knit together loans, mortgages and pension schemes and never dropped a stitch. He'd also fought and beaten a massive New York law firm that had been sent after us with a phony copyright claim by a conglomerate that meant to put us out of business.

He was just stepping out of his building as I pulled my lovingly restored '67 Mustang to the curb. I had anticipated the sly smile, the hint of mockery on his face.

"I want to know that you're feeling positive. Are you feeling positive?"

"Shut the door, Harold."

"Just because your first bold leap of the day landed you in a pile of shit..."

"Yeah, yeah..."

"... doesn't mean the next one will necessarily do the same."

I pulled out to re-join the traffic. "It was just compost. You're as bad as Charlie."

He sniffed the air ostentatiously. "Still, another shower might have been a good idea. Just kidding, relax. We're going to get everything we want this morning, I swear it." He started to laugh. "Boy, I'd like to have been there with a camera!"

I decided not to tell him about the near-miss with the truck.

"And what's all this about getting up in the middle of the night for comfort foods? Hot chocolate, my God!"

I wondered for a split second if Anne had also told him how and why I never got around to drinking it. Then I smiled. What if she had? He had become her friend just as much as mine. I was glad they got along so well.

The fact that Harold had never married had made Anne wonder briefly whether he was gay. But I couldn't believe that, if he was, I wouldn't have known. Besides, he'd never lacked girlfriends, some of them very beautiful, some of them very accomplished, many of them both. He was attractive to women in an easy-going, understated sort of way. He knew exactly who he was, didn't come on macho, never seemed to ask more than they were prepared to give. Besides, he was only my age - thirty-four. Time enough.

"... especially if Chuck Morgan starts `thinking out loud' the way he does," I suddenly heard Harold saying. "Don't get drawn into that. Just dig in and stick to what we agreed."

"I'm sorry," I said, "I didn't quite get all of that."

He looked at me. "Where did I lose you?"

"From the top down to Chuck Morgan thinking out loud."

Harold rolled his eyes. "Forget it. What you don't know now it's too late to fix. Just nod and smile and let me do the talking." He had glance my way as he spoke, and suddenly I was acutely aware that he hadn't turned away. I avoided meeting his gaze, embarrassed and feeling almost guilty for some reason. There was an edge of concern in his voice when he spoke. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You're sure you didn't land on your head..?"

*

Bob Crossfield was a genial man with silver hair and a big shapeless body expertly streamlined by a carefully tailored suit. He crossed to us with hand extended as we were shown into his office. We sat in comfortable armchairs and a secretary appeared with coffee on a silver tray. Harold caught my eye, looking smug. He knew that this greeting from the bank president meant that we were well on our way to getting precisely the terms we wanted. I relaxed a little, but still felt uncharacteristically nervous, unable to pin my uneasiness on anything in particular.

After a few minutes of conversation Roy Gaines, Crossfield's assistant, came in to say that the rest of the team were assembled in the conference room. I started to get to my feet, but, as I did, something strange and alarming happened. It was as though something snapped, or burst, inside my head, giving me a sudden feeling of being hopelessly cut off from everything around me.

"A stroke!" was my first panic-stricken thought. "Brain hemorrhage." I knew that it could happen even to young and apparently healthy people. My fall that morning had maybe done more damage than I'd realized. I wanted to cry out for help, but no sound would come. The three men in the room with me had become distant, hazy figures, apparently unaware of my plight. Their voices slowed and mixed into a mechanical, meaningless drone, and my own breathing and heartbeat thundered in my ears. Instinctively I grabbed for my head, stumbled, and felt I was about to pitch full length on the floor.

Then, just as abruptly, everything returned to normal. Sound and vision popped back into focus as though nothing had happened. I realized at once that I hadn't made the exhibition of myself that I feared I had. The hand grab to my head became a polite cover for an improvised cough, the brief unsteadiness passed unnoticed. All the same I needed a moment to pull myself together, take a few deep breaths, get a grip. I asked for the men's room before going into the meeting. Gaines showed me to a panelled door in the back of the office.

The relief at finding myself alone for a moment was extraordinary, almost as though I was running from some enemy and suddenly found myself in sanctuary. Was I sick? Some kind of virus? I looked at my reflection in the mirror above the washbowl: perfectly normal, neither flushed nor pale. And yet I was suddenly feeling alternately hot and cold. I dowsed my face in water, dried it, and took another look. Nothing had changed. Except -

I spun around. There was no sign of anyone behind me, and yet I could swear - no, I knew - that I had seen a movement in the mirror. I turned back to it. Nothing. Had someone opened the door to make sure I was all right, then quickly withdrawn? Surely I had locked it. I checked. I had.

So there was no one in the room. Just myself. And I was seeing things.

It seemed to me that this was one of those times when the best thing to do is go home, get into bed, and stay there. But whatever the reasons for my distracted jumpiness that morning - mental, physical, real or imaginary - I had an important meeting to get through, and get through it I would!

I gave my reflection one last, defiant glare, and turned to leave.

*

Seated around the long table in the panelled conference room were five men and one woman. We had all met at least once before, nonetheless Crossfield made introductions and we shook hands.

In front of each one of us was a water glass and carafe, plus a legal pad and felt-tip pen with the bank's name on it. Also everyone was supplied with a copy of the

bank's report on Hamilton Publications Inc., a tight little document full of words like growth curve, profit projection and all the rest of the jargon-riddled double-talk that experts use to dress up their guesswork. Crossfield made introductory remarks, I delivered a short prepared speech about how glad I was to be sitting around a table with them all, then began doodling on my legal pad as Harold launched into the details.

Obviously I knew every dot and comma of what was under discussion, but I remember being struck at one point by my remarkable lack of attention to what was actually being said. I thought as I glanced up that I caught an odd look in Bob Crossfield's eye. Chuck Morgan was also looking my way. He was only a couple of years older than me, but almost completely bald and with a tennis player's wiry physique. I put down the pen and made a show of paying close attention.

Crossfield asked me if I had anything to add to what Harold had said. I knew he would, and I said I hadn't. The discussion was then opened out to include the whole group. Sure enough Chuck Morgan started "thinking out loud" in a direction which, if unchecked, would have significantly lowered the bank's risk and increased their control. Harold, with infinite grace, quickly circumvented him and looked to me for murmurs and nods of agreement, which I readily supplied. The "thoughts" were abandoned.

Others had little to add, and it became clear that the meeting was indeed a formality, there to give its imprimatur to what had already been decided. I reached out to pour myself a glass of water. I don't know why but my mouth was suddenly very dry, my lips sticking together so that I felt if I had to speak the words would come out incoherently. It was as the glass was halfway to my mouth that I caught sight of what I had been doodling a few minutes ago.

I am not gifted artistically, and anything I draw usually resembles the work of one of those chimpanzees you see in learning experiments in TV documentaries. But I was startled by the clarity of what I was looking at now. I had drawn the same figure several times, first small then growing larger, as though approaching. It was the figure of a woman running. She was holding out her arms as though reaching for something or someone. She was obviously in terror, and in the third sketch had fallen to her knees and was crawling. In the fifth she was stretched out on the ground, though still apparently trying to move. In the sixth she was pinned down like a specimen of some insect on a slide, or else crushed by some immense, unseen weight. The seventh sketch was a dark and horrible thing, a Goya-like glimpse of something too terrible to contemplate, an impression of pain, dismemberment and death.

"Rick? Rick!" Harold repeated my name louder. I must have been called upon to make some response, but I hadn't heard a thing. Without looking up I knew that

all eyes were on me. A silence had fallen on the room. It was obvious to everyone that something was wrong.

The crash that the glass made as it slipped from my fingers was like an explosion. It was followed by the sound of my chair sliding back violently. By the time it hit the floor I was racing for the door, oblivious of the astonishment and alarm all around me.

But none of it mattered. All that counted was what was in my head, the knowledge that was suddenly planted there. Maybe "planted" is the wrong word. It was knowledge unveiled, as though it had been there all along and I had been suppressing it.

At any rate I knew for sure, just as surely as though a voice had spoken, what it all meant.

Maybe even that isn't accurate. Maybe instead of knowing I was simply gripped by a compulsion. Instead of thinking I was responding, though without any knowledge of what I was responding to. I was propelled - yes, that was it, propelled. - by a force that wasn't physical or even mental. What I was doing had to be done. It was stronger than conviction. It was inevitable.

And yet there was uncertainty. Not uncertainty of purpose, but of whether I could achieve what I knew I must attempt. If I had been stopped then and made to explain what I thought I was doing, I'm not sure I would have been able to. All I knew was that the woman I had drawn was Anne. I knew she wasn't reaching out for me but for Charlie. I had drawn the desperation of a woman trying to save her child.

But from what?

Without knowing how I got there, I found myself in the underground parking lot with my car keys in my hand. As I drove out with squealing tires I caught a glimpse of Harold and Roy Gaines, who must have followed me, waving at me to stop. I ignored them, as I ignored the flimsy wooden barrier that the startled gate man would have raised for me had I paused to hand over the validated parking ticket in my pocket. It scraped along the Mustang's hood, shattered the windshield, then flew off its hinge and spun towards the ceiling.

For some time - again I don't know how long - I must have driven with the opaque labyrinthine pattern of my shattered windshield blocking any view of where I was going. I remember that eventually I punched a fist through it - and found I was exactly where I expected to be, approaching a stop sign at an intersection of three roads. Ignoring the sign I swung through protesting traffic and took the first exit. Even then I didn't know where I was headed. I just knew that I was headed somewhere.

How I got away with so many infractions of the law in so short a space of time I shall never know. Speed and luck, I suppose. But even if there had been police cars chasing me with flashing lights and wailing sirens, I probably wouldn't have noticed. I doubt I would have noticed anything short of gunfire, with bullets thudding into the upholstery all around me. And maybe not even that.

Later, much later when I had time to reflect on it all, I went back over the road and measured the distance I drove that morning. It was exactly 3.9 miles from the exit of the bank parking lot to the spot where the traffic jam started. I don't remember any sense of frustration when I saw the long tailback starting under the bridge and winding up Pilgrim Hill and out of sight. It was obvious that the road was totally blocked somewhere up ahead. What I don't know - honestly don't know despite the number of times I've tried to recall the moment - was whether I knew then what had happened; or whether I was still simply hurtling forward in an unthinking trance. Certainly there was no doubt in my mind by then about where I was going. I sprang from my car, leaving the door open and the engine running, and started scrambling up the grassy slope to the left of the road. People watched me from below, wondering who this madman was, and where he had to be so urgently.

At the top of the slope, sweating, clothes torn and muddied, fingernails ripped and bleeding from the final hard-won, steepening yards of the climb, I stopped and looked towards the head of the jam. I knew exactly where it was, of course. But did I know what it was? From where I stood I couldn't see much aside from a general confusion, people running, a crowd forming, an odd scattering of vehicles that suggested an accident. I ran towards it as fast as I could.

There were a few token grunts and protests as I shouldered my way through to see what was at the center of it all. But by then I think I knew. I had known for a split second in the conference room when I dropped the glass and ran out. I had glimpsed the awful thing that confronted me now, but the image had been pushed to the back of my mind while I negotiated the journey here. Now there was no turning from it.

A huge refrigerated rig, much larger than the one that had almost killed me that morning, had gone out of control and jumped the central divide. It had jackknifed and turned over. The back had sprung open and deep-frozen carcasses of meat were scattered everywhere. Beneath the vehicle a small car lay crushed. It was pale green and still, though only just, recognizable as the imported "Deux Chevaux" that Anne had wanted ever since our first trip to Europe. They had stopped making that model, and it was a while before I found a specialist dealer who supplied me with one for her thirtieth birthday.

She had been so happy, thrilled like a child, when she came downstairs and found a key on the table with a huge bow attached to it, then saw the car through

the window parked outside. I had put a picnic hamper on the back seat, filled with French bread and champagne and a bottle of wine and some foie-gras and a birthday cake with her name on it. All we had to do was drive out to a spot I'd already chosen and...

... and now she lay dying, trapped, bleeding, pushed back as though recoiling in some impossible cartoon-like exaggeration of shocked outrage. Except this was no cartoon, and no exaggeration. It was simply the literal truth of what massive, unstoppable force had done to her.

I don't know whether I cried out, said anything, in any way communicated who I was, but people suddenly made way for me, let me go forward, lowering their voices, bringing a strange stillness to the scene.

A man was on one knee, struggling with what remained of the car's rear door. If I saw his face I don't remember it. All I remember is a broad back with a cheap gray suit stretched tight across it as his fleshy shoulders worked. He had a thick neck with a roll of fat above the collar. His hair was reddish-brown, short and greasy, brushed back flat on his head. And suddenly, as he turned, he had my son in his arms.

Charlie was deathly white but alive - and, I realized as he clung to me and I felt the sobs racking my body, he was unhurt.

I don't remember if I handed him to someone or if someone prized him gently from me. At moments like that there is, I think, an almost psychic understanding between people. Things are said, things are done, without reflection and with a sureness that is lacking in more normal times. Charlie was taken from me to be cared for, and he knew this was right. He didn't cry, he didn't cling, he knew what he must do. He was in shock, of course; but what does "in shock" mean except that some deep and dependable instinct takes over to guide us through moments which would otherwise overwhelm us totally?

I turned to Anne. She could move her head only slightly, barely more than an inch; but her eyes made the rest of the journey to meet mine, and she saw her own death in my anguish.

Her lips moved and I bent closer. But she wasn't trying to speak; only to give me a faint last smile, a loving goodbye, a reassurance that she knew and accepted what was happening.

The agony of not being able to hold her as she died was all but unbearable, but she was trapped in a vice-like coffin of steel that left me outside, a helpless onlooker. Somewhere distantly I heard a siren drawing close, then a voice saying it would be hours before they could cut her free.

Only we didn't have hours. These were our last minutes. Perhaps seconds.

I reached for her face, almost afraid to touch in case the contact brought back the physical pain which she seemed mercifully to have slipped beyond. But she gave a faint sigh, almost of pleasure, as my fingertips caressed her cheek and lips. I leaned forward to kiss her, but her eyes glazed over. Where there had been stillness there was now only the emptiness of death.

Somehow, as I slumped forward with a howl of unfathomable loss that seemed to come from somewhere so deep in my being that it was almost outside of me, my hand found hers. She must have thrown it up, instinctively trying to protect herself from the impact, and now it protruded, fingers splayed, from the appalling inch-wide gap between the dash and the seat on which she lay.

The people around us let me be, knowing that my grief must have this moment, letting the sobs shake free unhindered from my body. Then, very gently, I felt hands taking hold of me, pulling me away.

I said yes, let them, this is right. Don't spoil the dignity of her going with your own self-centered torment. Just do what must be done. Think of your son, he is alone, he needs you.

But I had reckoned without the rage, the senseless, aching rage that swept through me like a flame. Against my will I hunched forward, clung to what remained of her, my eyes shut tight against a truth I could not tolerate. As though in slow, slow motion my head arched back and I roared into the blackness of my inner universe: a roar of terrifying, primal, primitive defiance.

That was when I felt the movement in her hand. I didn't open my eyes at first. I knew that I was dreaming and didn't want to wake from the forlorn, illusory hope that I was wrong, that she still lived.

And then I heard her voice. "Get me out of here before this thing rolls over. Richard, help me! Get me out of here, quick!"

I looked. Her eyes were open, locked on mine, wide and full of fear but fighting, brave. I was a sleepwalker, a passive, stunned spectator of the next few moments.

Help was everywhere. Strong men lifting, straining, carrying her to safety. She was alive! Cut, bruised, in shock, but living, standing there unaided suddenly, before me.

Somehow I swam forward through the dizzying waves of unreality that swept over me. I took her in my arms. She was solid, warm, and real. It seemed impossible, but she was alive!

It was Anne who took control now, calming me, telling me over and over that everything was all right. She stroked my face, her dark eyes pouring reassurance into mine, soothing me with gentle child-like noises of affection. I tried to speak but couldn't. She put her fingers to my lips. Don't try. It's all right. We're together. Everything is all right. We're safe.

Suddenly, almost guilty at having been so caught up in my own emotion, I remembered Charlie. I turned and called his name, expecting him to run to us, to be swept into our arms and hugged and kissed and reassured that there was nothing more to fear.

But no child ran from the surrounding group of silent onlookers. I called his name again. Blank stares, silently exchanged looks of puzzlement were all that met my gaze.

I turned to Anne. "Where is he? He was here, safe."

"Who?"

With a chill that reached my soul I saw in her eyes the same uncertain, half-frightened incomprehension that was all around me. "Charlie! Our son Charlie! They got him out! He wasn't hurt! I held him. Charlie!" I was screaming suddenly, turning wildly, calling for our son who had vanished into thin air.

"Richard! Richard!" Anne was holding me, trying to calm me, fighting to restrain my helpless, flailing arms. "Don't, Richard, don't! Don't do this!"

"Where is he? I couldn't have been wrong? Where is he? Where's our son."

"Richard! Richard!" She shook me, made me look at her, fixed my eyes with her own determined, anxious gaze. "We have no son. I don't know what you're saying. We have no son."

Again I felt the waves of blackness sweeping over me. I fought to keep my balance, to hang onto my sanity in the face of this absurdity. My head spun one way, then another, taking in the groups of baffled, murmuring onlookers. What were they to do? Who was this crazy man screaming for a child whom only he seemed to imagine had existed?

Then I saw the accident, the jackknifed rig and the car trapped under it.

But the car was no longer Anne's car. In the grotesque tangle of metal, glass and leather I recognized the color and distorted outline of my own car. It was my dark blue Mustang that had collided with the truck.

Something warm and liquid ran down my face, catching the corner of my eye. I reached up and my hand reappeared in front of me soaked in blood.

I looked down at my clothes. They were not the same clothes I had been wearing. Nor was the expensive-looking, though now torn and stained grey trouser suit that Anne had on, anything that I had seen on her before. She had never owned a suit like that. And yet it was Anne looking at me with concern and fear, as though I was in some terrible trouble and she didn't know how to help me.

There was a flurry of movement in the crowd surrounding us. Two men pushed through in the uniform of paramedics, unfolding a stretcher as they came. In their eyes I saw the trained, alert, professional calm of people schooled in dealing with emergencies. They were coming for me, preparing to take care of this panic-stricken, hysterical victim of... of what?

As the blackness finally overwhelmed me and I began falling, the last thing I felt was strong hands grabbing me before I hit the ground.