

Stephen  
King

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The  
Dark  
Half

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VIKING

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**The  
Dark  
Half**

**VIKING**

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'Salem's Lot  
The Shining  
Cujo  
The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger  
Christine  
Pet Sematary  
Cycle of the Werewolf  
The Talisman (with Peter Straub)  
It  
The Eyes of the Dragon  
Misery  
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The Dark Tower II: The Drawing of the Three

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NONFICTION

Danse Macabre

SCREENPLAYS

Creepshow  
Cat's Eye  
Silver Bullet  
Maximum Overdrive  
Pet Sematary

# rologue

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“Cut him,” Machine said. “Cut him while I stand here and watch. I want to see the blood flow. Don’t make me tell you twice.”

—*Machine’s Way*  
by George Stark



People's lives—their real lives, as opposed to their simple physical existences—begin at different times. The real life of Thad Beaumont, a young boy who was born and raised in the Ridgeway section of Bergenfield, New Jersey, began in 1960. Two things happened to him that year. The first shaped his life; the second almost ended it. That was the year Thad Beaumont was eleven.

In January he submitted a short story to a writing contest sponsored by *American Teen* magazine. In June, he received a letter from the magazine's editors telling him that he had been awarded an Honorable Mention in the contest's Fiction category. The letter went on to say that the judges would have awarded him Second Prize had his application not revealed that he was still two years away from becoming a bona fide "American Teen." Still, the editors said, his story, "Outside Marty's House," was an extraordinarily mature work, and he was to be congratulated.

Two weeks later, a Certificate of Merit arrived from *American Teen*. It came registered mail, insured. The certificate had his name on it in letters so convolutedly Old English that he could barely read them, and a gold seal at the bottom, embossed with the *American Teen* logo—the silhouettes of a crewcut boy and a pony-tailed girl jitterbugging.

His mother swept Thad, a quiet, earnest boy who could never

seem to hold onto things and often tripped over his own large feet, into her arms and smothered him with kisses.

His father was unimpressed.

"If it was so goddam good, why didn't they give him some money?" he grunted from the depths of his easy-chair.

"Glen—"

"Never mind. Maybe Ernest Hemingway there could run me in a beer when you get done maulin him."

His mother said no more . . . but she had the original letter and the certificate which followed it framed, paying for the job out of her pin-money, and hung it in his room, over the bed. When relatives or other visitors came, she took them in to see it. Thad, she told her company, was going to be a great writer someday. She had always felt he was destined for greatness, and here was the first proof. This embarrassed Thad, but he loved his mother far too much to say so.

Embarrassed or not, Thad decided his mother was at least partly right. He didn't know if he had it in him to be a *great* writer or not, but he was going to be *some* kind of a writer no matter what. Why not? He was good at it. More important, he got off on doing it. When the words came right, he got off on it in a big way. And they wouldn't always be able to withhold the money from him on a technicality. He wouldn't be eleven forever.

The second important thing to happen to him in 1960 began in August. That was when he began to have headaches. They weren't bad at first, but by the time school let in again in early September, the mild, lurking pains in his temples and behind his forehead had progressed to sick and monstrous marathons of agony. He could do nothing when these headaches held him in their grip but lie in his darkened room, waiting to die. By the end of September, he hoped he *would* die. And by the middle of October, the pain had progressed to the point where he began to fear he would not.

The onset of these terrible headaches was usually marked by a phantom sound which only he could hear—it sounded like the distant cheeping of a thousand small birds. Sometimes he fancied he could almost see these birds, which he thought were sparrows, clustering on telephone lines and rooftops by the dozens, the way they did in the spring and the fall.

His mother took him to see Dr. Seward.



Dr. Seward peeked into his eyes with an ophthalmoscope, and shook his head. Then, drawing the curtains closed and turning off the overhead light, he instructed Thad to look at a white space of wall in the examination room. Using a flashlight, he flicked a bright circle of light on and off rapidly while Thad looked at it.

"Does that make you feel funny, son?"

Thad shook his head.

"You don't feel woozy? Like you might faint?"

Thad shook his head again.

"Do you smell anything? Like rotten fruit or burning rags?"

"No."

"What about your birds? Did you hear them while you were looking at the flashing light?"

"No," Thad said, mystified.

"It's nerves," his father said later, when Thad had been dismissed to the outer waiting room. "The goddam kid's a bundle of nerves."

"I think it's migraine," Dr. Seward told them. "Unusual in one so young, but not unheard of. And he seems very . . . intense."

"He is," Shayla Beaumont said, not without some approval.

"Well, there may be a cure someday. For now, I'm afraid he'll just have to suffer through them."

"Yeah, and us with him," Glen Beaumont said.

But it was not nerves, and it was not migraine, and it was not over.

Four days before Halloween, Shayla Beaumont heard one of the kids with whom Thad waited for the schoolbus each morning begin to holler. She looked out the kitchen window and saw her son lying in the driveway, convulsing. His lunchbox lay beside him, its freight of fruit and sandwiches spilled onto the driveway's hot-top surface. She ran out, shooed the other children away, and then just stood over him helplessly, afraid to touch him.

If the big yellow bus with Mr. Reed at the wheel had pulled up any later, Thad might have died right there at the foot of the driveway. But Mr. Reed had been a medic in Korea. He was able to get the boy's head back and open an airway before Thad choked to death on his own tongue. He was taken to Bergenfield County Hospital by ambulance and a doctor named Hugh Pritchard just happened to

be in the E.R., drinking coffee and swapping golf-lies with a friend, when the boy was wheeled in. And Hugh Pritchard also just happened to be the best neurologist in the State of New Jersey.

Pritchard ordered the X-rays and read them. He showed them to the Beaumonts, asking them to look with particular care at a vague shadow he had circled with a yellow wax pencil.

"This," he said. "What's this?"

"How the hell should we know?" Glen Beaumont asked. "You're the goddam doctor."

"Right," Pritchard said dryly.

"The wife said it looked like he pitched a fit," Glen said.

Dr. Pritchard said, "If you mean he had a seizure, yes, he did. If you mean he had an *epileptic* seizure, I'm pretty sure he didn't. A seizure as serious as your son's would surely have been *grand mal*, and Thad showed no reaction whatever to the Litton Light Test. In fact, if Thad had *grand mal* epilepsy, you wouldn't need a doctor to point the fact out to you. He'd be doing the Watusi on the living room rug every time the picture on your TV set decided to roll."

"Then what is it?" Shayla asked timidly.

Pritchard turned back to the X-ray mounted on the front of the light-box. "What is *that*?" he responded, and tapped the circled area again. "The sudden onset of headaches coupled with any lack of previous seizures suggests to me that your son has a brain tumor, probably still small and hopefully benign."

Glen Beaumont stared at the doctor stonily while his wife stood beside him and wept into her handkerchief. She wept without making a sound. This silent weeping was the result of years of spousal training. Glen's fists were fast and hurtful and almost never left marks, and after twelve years of silent sorrow, she probably could not have cried out loud even if she had wanted to.

"Does all this mean you want to cut his brains?" Glen asked with his usual tact and delicacy.

"I wouldn't put it quite that way, Mr. Beaumont, but I believe exploratory surgery is called for, yes." And he thought: *If there really is a God, and if He really made us in His Own image, I don't like to think about why there are so damned many men like this one walking around with the fates of so many others in their hands.*

Glen was silent for several long moments, his head down, his brow

furrowed in thought. At last he raised his head and asked the question which troubled him most of all.

“Tell me the truth, Doc—how much is all this gonna cost?”

The assisting O.R. nurse saw it first.

Her scream was shrill and shocking in the operating room, where the only sounds for the last fifteen minutes had been Dr. Pritchard’s murmured commands, the hiss of the bulky life-support machinery, and the brief, high whine of the Negli saw.

She stumbled backward, struck a rolling Ross tray on which almost two dozen instruments had been neatly laid out, and knocked it over. It struck the tiled floor with an echoing clang which was followed by a number of smaller tinkling sounds.

“Hilary!” the head nurse shouted. Her voice was full of shock and surprise. She forgot herself so far as to actually take half a step toward the fleeing woman in her flapping green-gown.

Dr. Albertson, who was assisting, kicked the head nurse briefly in the calf with one of his slippered feet. “Remember where you are, please.”

“Yes, Doctor.” She turned back at once, not even looking toward the O.R. door as it banged open and Hilary exited stage left, still screaming like a runaway fire engine.

“Get the hardware in the sterilizer,” Albertson said. “Right away. Chop-chop.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

She began to gather up the instruments, breathing hard, clearly flustered but under control.

Dr. Pritchard seemed to have noticed none of this. He was looking with rapt attention into the window which had been carved in Thad Beaumont’s skull.

“Incredible,” he murmured. “Just incredible. This is really one for the books. If I weren’t seeing it with my own eyes—”

The hiss of the sterilizer seemed to wake him up, and he looked at Dr. Albertson.

“I want suction,” he said sharply. He glanced at the nurse. “And what the fuck are *you* doing? The Sunday *Times* crossword? Get your ass over here with those!”

She came, carrying the instruments in a fresh pan.

"Give me suction, Lester," Pritchard said to Albertson. "Right now. Then I'm going to show you something you never saw outside of a county fair freak-show."

Albertson wheeled over the suction-pump, ignoring the head nurse, who leaped back out of his way, balancing the instruments deftly as she did so.

Pritchard was looking at the anesthesiologist.

"Give me good B.P., my friend. Good B.P. is all I ask."

"He's one-oh-five over sixty-eight, Doctor. Steady as a rock."

"Well, his mother says we've got the next William Shakespeare laid out here, so keep it that way. Suck on him, Lester—don't tickle him with the goddam thing!"

Albertson applied suction, clearing the blood. The monitoring equipment beeped steadily, monotonously, comfortingly, in the background. Then it was his own breath he was sucking in. He felt as if someone had punched him high up in the belly.

"Oh my God. Oh Jesus. Jesus Christ." He recoiled for a moment . . . then leaned in close. Above his mask and behind his horn-rimmed spectacles, his eyes were wide with sudden glinting curiosity. "What is it?"

"I think you see what it is," Pritchard said. "It's just that it takes a second to get used to. I've read about it but never expected to actually see it."

Thad Beaumont's brain was the color of a conch shell's outer edge—a medium gray with just the slightest tinge of rose.

Protruding from the smooth surface of the dura was a single blind and malformed human eye. The brain was pulsing slightly. The eye pulsed with it. It looked as if it were trying to wink at them. It was this—the look of the wink—which had driven the assisting nurse from the O.R.

"Jesus God, what is it?" Albertson asked again.

"It's nothing," Pritchard said. "Once it might have been part of a living, breathing human being. Now it's nothing. Except trouble, that is. And this happens to be trouble we can handle."

Dr. Loring, the anesthesiologist, said: "Permission to look, Dr. Pritchard?"

"He still steady?"

"Yes."

“Come on, then. It’s one to tell your grandchildren about. But be quick.”

While Loring had his look, Pritchard turned to Albertson. “I want the Negli,” he said. “I’m going to open him a little wider. Then we probe. I don’t know if I can get all of it, but I’m going to get all of it I can.”

Les Albertson, now acting as head O.R. nurse, slapped the freshly sterilized probe into Pritchard’s gloved hand when Pritchard called for it. Pritchard—who was now humming the *Bonanza* theme-song under his breath—worked the wound quickly and almost effortlessly, referring to the dental-type mirror mounted on the end of the probe only occasionally. He worked chiefly by sense of touch alone. Albertson would later say he had never witnessed such a thrilling piece of seat-of-the-pants surgery in his entire life.

In addition to the eye, they found part of a nostril, three fingernails, and two teeth. One of the teeth had a small cavity in it. The eye went on pulsing and trying to wink right up to the second when Pritchard used the needle-scalpel to first puncture and then excise it. The entire operation, from initial probe to final excision, took only twenty-seven minutes. Five chunks of flesh plopped wetly into the stainless-steel pan on the Ross tray beside Thad’s shaven head.

“I think we’re clear,” Pritchard said at last. “All the foreign tissue seemed to be connected by rudimentary ganglia. Even if there *are* other chunks, I think the chances are good that we’ve killed them.”

“But . . . how can that be, if the kid’s still alive? I mean, it’s all a part of *him*, isn’t it?” Loring asked, bewildered.

Pritchard pointed toward the tray. “We find an eye, some teeth, and a bunch of fingernails in this kid’s head and you think it was a part of him? Did you see any of his nails missing? Want to check?”

“But even cancer is just a part of the patient’s own—”

“This wasn’t cancer,” Pritchard told him patiently. His hands went about their own work as he talked. “In a great many deliveries where the mother gives birth to a single child, that child actually started existence as a twin, my friend. It may run as high as two in every ten. What happens to the other fetus? The stronger absorbs the weaker.”

“Absorbs it? Do you mean it *eats* it?” Loring asked. He looked a little green. “Are we talking about *in utero* cannibalism here?”

“Call it whatever you like; it happens fairly often. If they ever develop the sonagram device they keep talking about at the med conferences, we may actually get to find out *how* often. But no matter how frequently or infrequently it happens, what we saw today is much more rare. Part of this boy’s twin went unabsorbed. It happened to end up in his prefrontal lobe. It could just as easily have wound up in his intestines, his spleen, his spinal cord, anywhere. Usually the only doctors who see something like this are pathologists—it turns up in autopsies, and I’ve never heard of one where the foreign tissue was the cause of death.”

“Well, what happened here?” Albertson asked.

“Something set this mass of tissue, which was probably submicroscopic in size a year ago, going again. The growth clock of the absorbed twin, which should have run down forever at least a month before Mrs. Beaumont gave birth, somehow got wound up again . . . and the damned thing actually started to run. There is no mystery about what happened; the intracranial pressure alone was enough to cause the kid’s headaches and the convulsion that got him here.”

“Yes,” Loring said softly, “but *why* did it happen?”

Pritchard shook his head. “If I’m still practicing anything more demanding than my golf-stroke thirty years from now, you can ask me then. I might have an answer. All I know now is that I have located and excised a very specialized, very rare sort of tumor. A *benign* tumor. And, barring complications, I believe that’s all the parents need to know. The kid’s father would make Piltdown Man look like one of the Quiz Kids. I can’t see explaining to him that I gave his eleven-year-old son an abortion. Les, let’s close him up.”

And, as an afterthought, he added pleasantly to the O.R. nurse:

“I want that silly cunt who ran out of here fired. Make a note, please.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

Thad Beaumont left the hospital nine days after his surgery. The left side of his body was distressingly weak for nearly six months afterward, and occasionally, when he was very tired, he saw odd, not-quite-random patterns of flashing lights before his eyes.

His mother had bought him an old Remington 32 typewriter as a get-well present, and these flashes of light happened most frequently

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when he was hunched over it in the hour before bedtime, struggling with the right way to say something or trying to figure out what should happen next in the story he was writing. Eventually these passed, too.

That eerie, phantom chirruping sound—the sound of squadrons of sparrows on the wing—did not recur at all following the operation.

He continued to write, gaining confidence and polishing his emerging style, and he sold his first story—to *American Teen*—six years after his real life began. After that, he just never looked back.

So far as his parents or Thad himself ever knew, a small benign tumor had been removed from the prefrontal lobe of his brain in the autumn of his eleventh year. When he thought about it at all (which he did less and less frequently as the years passed), he thought only that he had been extremely lucky to survive.

Many patients who underwent brain surgery in those primitive days did not.







## Fool's Stuffing

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Machine straightened the paper-clips slowly and carefully with his long, strong fingers. "Hold his head, Jack," he said to the man behind Halstead. "Hold it tightly, please."

Halstead saw what Machine meant to do and began to scream as Jack Rangely pressed his big hands against the sides of his head, holding it steady. The screams rang and echoed in the abandoned warehouse. The vast empty space acted as a natural amplifier. Halstead sounded like an opera singer warming up on opening night.

"I'm back," Machine said. Halstead squeezed his eyes shut, but it did no good. The small steel rod slid effortlessly through the left lid and punctured the eyeball beneath with a faint popping sound. Sticky, gelatinous fluid began to seep out. "I'm back from the dead and you don't seem glad to see me at all, you ungrateful son of a bitch."

—*Riding to Babylon*  
by George Stark