

The Pit-Yakker

by Brian Lumley

Born in Harden, Durham on December 2, 1937, Brian Lumley began selling short fiction in the late 1960s, and throughout the 1970s he was chiefly known for a series of books based on the Cthulhu Mythos of H.P. Lovecraft: The Caller of the Black, The Burrowers Beneath, Beneath the Moors, The Transition of Titus Crow, and others. While Lumley still likes to muck about with the Cthulhu Mythos, during the 1980s he concentrated on massive novels of contemporary horror, most notably his Psychomech and Necroscope sagas. Lumley's latest novels include The House of Doors and Necroscope IV: Deadspaw. He has just completed the fifth and final Necroscope novel, Deadspawn, and is now putting together two collections of his short stories, "to be titled Fruiting Bodies & Other Fungi, and (some other silly title)." Tor Books will be bringing out Psychomech I and II as a single volume, to be followed by Psychamok.

Retired from the army after twenty-two years, Brian Lumley now lives with his wife, Dorothy, in Devon. Like "Fruiting Bodies" in last year's Year's Best Horror, "The Pit-Yakker" makes strong and effective use of the sort of English locales that won't be included in your tour package.

When I was sixteen, my father used to say to me: "Watch what you're doing with the girls; you're an idiot to smoke, for it's expensive and unhealthy; stay away from Raymond Maddison!" My mother had died two years earlier, so he'd taken over her share of the nagging, too.

The girls? Watch what I was doing? At sixteen I barely knew what I was doing! I knew what I wanted to do, but the how of it was a different matter entirely. Cigarettes? I enjoyed them; at the five-a-day stage, they still gave me that occasionally sweet taste and made my head spin. Raymond Maddison? I had gone to school with him, and because he lived so close to us we'd used to walk home together. But his mother was a little weak-minded, his older brother had been put away for molesting or something, and Raymond himself was thick as two short planks, hulking and unlovely, and a very shadowy character in general. Or at least he gave that impression.

Girls didn't like him: he smelled of bread and dripping and didn't clean his teeth too well, and for two years now he'd been wearing the same jacket and trousers, which had grown pretty tight on him. His short hair and little piggy eyes made him look bristly, and there was that looseness about his lips, which you find in certain idiots. If you were told that ladies' underwear was disappearing from the washing-lines, you'd perhaps think of Raymond. If someone was jumping out on small girls at dusk and shouting boo!, he was the one who'd spring to mind. If the little-boy-up-the-road's kitten got strangled...

Not that that sort of thing happened a lot in Harden, for it didn't. Up there on the northeast coast in those days, the Bobbies on the beat were still Bobbies, unhampered by modern "ethics" and other humane restrictions. Catch a kid drawing red, hairy, diamond-shaped designs on the school wall, and wallop!, he'd get a clout round the earhole, dragged off home to his parents, and doubtless another wallop. Also, in the schools, the cane was still in force. Young people were still being "brought up," were made or at least encouraged to grow up straight and strong, and not allowed to bolt and run wild. Most of them, anyway. But it wasn't easy, not in that environment.

Harden lay well outside the fringes of "Geordie-land" -- Newcastle and environs -- but real outsiders termed us all Geordies anyway. It was the way we spoke; our near-Geordie accents leaped between soft and harsh as readily as the Welsh tongue soars up and down the scales; a dialect which at once identified us as "pit-yakkers," grimy-black shambling colliers, coal-miners. The fact that my father was a Harden green-grocer made no difference: I came from the colliery and so was a pit-yakker. I was an apprentice woodcutting machinist in Hartlepool? -- so what? My collar was grimy, wasn't it? With coal dust? And no matter how much I tried to disguise it I had that accent, didn't I? Pit-yakker!

But at sixteen I was escaping from the image. One must, or sex remains forever a mystery. The girls -- the better girls, anyway -- in the big towns, even in Harden, Easingham, Blackhill and the other colliery villages, weren't much impressed by or interested in pit-yakkers. Which must have left Raymond Maddison in an entirely hopeless position. Everything about him literally shrieked of his origin, made worse by the fact that his father, a miner, was already grooming Raymond for the mine, too. You think I have a down on them, the colliers? No, for they were the salt of the earth. They still are. I merely give you the background.

As for my own opinion of Raymond: I thought I knew him and didn't for a moment consider him a bad sort. He loved John Wayne like I did, and liked to think of himself as a tough egg, as I did. But Nature and the world in general hadn't been so kind to him, and being a bit of a dunce didn't help much either. He was like a big scruffy dog who sits at the corner of the street grinning at everyone going by and wagging his tail, whom nobody ever pats for fear of fleas or mange or whatever, and who you're sure pees on the front wheel of your car every time you park it there. He probably doesn't, but somebody has to take the blame. That was how I saw Raymond.

So I was sixteen and some months, and Raymond Maddison about the same, and it was a Saturday in July. Normally when we met we'd pass the time of day. Just a few words: what was on at the cinema (in Harden there were two of them, the Ritz and the Empress -- for this was before Bingo closed most of them down), when was the next dance at the Old Victoria Hall, how many pints we'd downed last Friday at the British Legion. Dancing, drinking, smoking, and girls: it was a time of experimentation. Life had many flavors other than those that wafted out from the pit

and the coke-ovens. On this Saturday, however, he was the last person I wanted to see, and the very last I wanted to be seen with.

I was waiting for Moira, sitting on the recreation ground wall where the stumps of the old iron railings showed through, which they'd taken away thirteen years earlier for the war effort and never replaced. I had been a baby then but it was one of the memories I had: of the men in the helmets with the glass faceplates cutting down all the iron things to melt for the war. It had left only the low wall, which was ideal to sit on. In the summer the flat-capped miners would sit there to watch the kids flying kites in the recreation ground or playing on the swings, or just to sit and talk. There was a group of old-timers there that Saturday, too, all looking out across the dark, fuming colliery toward the sea; so when I saw Raymond hunching my way with his hands in his pockets, I turned and looked in the same direction, hoping he wouldn't notice me. But he already had.

"Hi, Joshua!" he said in his mumbling fashion, touching my arm. I don't know why I was christened Joshua: I wasn't Jewish or a Catholic or anything. I do know why; my father told me his father had been called Joshua, so that was it. Usually they called me Josh, which I liked because it sounded like a wild-western name. I could imagine John Wayne being called Josh. But Raymond occasionally forgot and called me Joshua.

"Hello, Raymond!" I said. I usually called him Ray, but if he noticed the difference he didn't say anything.

"Game of snooker?" It was an invitation.

"No," I shook my head. "I'm, er, waiting for someone."

"Who?"

"Mind your own business."

"Girl?" he said. "Moira? Saw you with her at the Ritz. Back row."

"Look, Ray, I -- "

"It's OK," he said, sitting down beside me on the wall. "We're jus' talking. I can go any time."

I groaned inside. He was bound to follow us. He did stupid things like that. I decided to make the best of it, glanced at him. "So, what are you doing? Have you found a job yet?"

He pulled a face. "Naw."

"Are you going to?"

"Pit. Next spring. My dad says."

"Uh-huh," I nodded. "Plenty of work there." I looked along the wall past the groundkeeper's house. That's the way Moira would come.

"Hey, look!" said Raymond. He took out a brand new Swiss Army penknife and handed it over for my inspection. As my eyes widened he beamed. "Beauty, eh?"

And it was. "Where'd you get it?" I asked him, opening it up. It was fitted with every sort of blade and attachment you could imagine. Three or four years earlier I would have loved a knife like that. But right now I couldn't see why I'd need it. OK for woodcarving or the Boy Scouts, or even the Boys' Brigade, but I'd left all that stuff behind. And anyway, the machines I was learning to use in my trade paled this thing to insignificance and made it look like a very primitive toy. Like a rasp beside a circular saw. I couldn't see why Raymond would want it either.

"Saved up for it," he said. "See, a saw. Two saws! One for metal, one for wood. Knives -- careful! -- sharp. Gouge -- "

"That's an auger," I said, "not a gouge. But... this one's a gouge, right enough. Look," and I eased the tool from its housing to show him.

"Corkscrew," he went on. "Scissors, file, hook..."

"Hook?"

"For hooking things. Magnetic. You can pick up screws."

"It's a good knife," I told him, giving it back. "How do you use it?"

"I haven't," he said, " -- yet."

I was getting desperate. "Ray, do me a favor. Look, I have to stay here and wait for her. And I'm short of cigs." I forked out a florin. "Bring me a packet, will you? Twenty? And I'll give you a few."

He took the coin. "You'll be here?"

I nodded, lying without saying anything. I had an unopened packet of twenty in my pocket. He said no more but loped off across the road, disappearing into one of the back streets leading to Harden's main road and shopping area. I let him get out of sight, then set off briskly past the groundskeeper's house, heading north.

Now, I know I've stated that in my opinion he was OK; but even so, still I knew he wasn't to be trusted. He just might follow us, if he could -- out of curiosity, perversity, don't ask me. You just couldn't be sure what he was thinking, that's all. And I didn't want him peeping on us.

It dawns on me now that in his "innocence" Raymond was anything but innocent. There are two sides to each of us, and in someone like him, a little lacking in basic understanding... well, who is to say that the dark side shouldn't on occasion

be just a shade darker? For illustration, there'd been that time when we were, oh, nine or ten years old? I had two white mice who lived in their box in the garden shed. They had their own swimming pool, too, made out of an old baking tray just two and a half inches deep. I'd trained them to swim to a floating tin lid for bits of bacon rind.

One day, playing with Raymond and the mice in the garden, I'd been called indoors about something or other. I was only inside a moment or two, but when I came back out he'd gone. Looking over the garden wall and down the street, I'd seen him tip-toeing off into the distance! A great hulk like him, slinking off like a cartoon cat!

Then I'd shrugged and returned to my game -- and just in time. The tin lid raft was upside-down, with Peter and Pan trapped underneath, paddling for all they were worth to keep their snouts up in the air trapped under there with them. It was only a small thing, I suppose, but it had given me bad dreams for a long time. So... instead of the hard nut I considered myself, maybe I was just a big softy after all. In some things.

But... did Raymond do it deliberately or was it an accident? And if the latter, then why was he slinking off like that? If he had tried to drown them, why? Jealousy? Something I had which he didn't have? Or sheer, downright nastiness? When I'd later tackled him about it, he'd just said: "Eh? Eh?" and looked dumb. That's the way it was with him. I could never figure out what went on in there.

Moira lived down by the high colliery wall, beyond which stood vast cones of coal, piled there, waiting to fuel the coke ovens. And as a backdrop to these black foothills, the wheelhouse towers rising like sooty sentinels, coming into view as I hurried through the grimy sunlit streets; a colliery in the summer seems strangely opposed to itself. In one of the towers a massive spoked wheel was spinning even now, raising or lowering a cage in its claustrophobic shaft. Miners, some still in their "pit black," even wearing their helmets and lamps, drew deep on cigarettes as they came away from the place. My father would have said: "As if their lungs aren't suffering enough already!"

I knew the exact route Moira would take from her gritty colliery street house to the recreation ground, but at each junction in its turn I scanned the streets this way and that, making sure I didn't miss her. By now Raymond would have brought the cigarettes and be on his way back to the wall.

"Hello, Josh!" she said, breathlessly surprised -- almost as if she hadn't expected to see me today -- appearing like a ray of extra bright sunlight from behind the freshly creosoted fencing of garden allotments. She stood back and looked me up and down. "So, you're all impatient to see me, eh? Or... maybe I was late?" She looked at me anxiously.

I had been hurrying and so was breathing heavily. I smiled, wiped my

forehead, said: "It's... just that there was someone I knew back there, at the recreation ground, and -- "

" -- You didn't want to be seen with me?" She frowned. She was mocking me, but I didn't know it.

"No, not that," I hurriedly denied it, "but -- "

And then she laughed and I knew she'd been teasing. "It's all right, Josh," she said. "I understand." She linked my arm. "Where are we going?"

"Walking," I said, turning her into the maze of allotments, trying to control my breathing, my heartbeat.

"I know that]" she said. "But where?"

"Down to the beach, and up again in Blackhill?"

"The beach is very dirty. Not very kind to good clothes." She was wearing a short blue skirt, white blouse, and a smart white jacket across her arm.

"The beach banks, then," I gulped. "And along the cliff paths to Easingham."

"You only want to get me where it's lonely," she said, but with a smile. "All right, then." And a moment later, "May I have a cigarette?"

I brought out my fresh pack and started to open it, but looking nervously around she said: "Not just yet. When we're farther into the allotments." She was six months my junior and lived close by; if someone saw her smoking it was likely to be reported to her father. But a few minutes later we shared a cigarette and she kissed me, blowing smoke into my mouth. I wondered where she'd learned to do that. Also, it took me by surprise -- the kiss, I mean. She was impulsive like that.

In retrospect, I suppose Moira was my first love. And they say you never forget the first one. Well, they mean you never forget the first time -- but I think your first love is the same, even if there's nothing physical. But she was the first one who'd kept me awake at night thinking of her, the first one who made me ache.

She was maybe five feet six or seven, had a heart-shaped face, huge dark come-to-bed eyes which I suspected and hoped hadn't yet kept their promise, a mouth maybe a fraction too wide, so that her face seemed to break open when she laughed, and hair that bounced on her shoulders entirely of its own accord. They didn't have stuff to make it bounce in those days.

Her figure was fully formed and she looked wonderful in a bathing costume, and her legs were long and tapering. Also, I had a thing about teeth, and Moira's were perfect and very, very white. Since meeting her the first time I'd scrubbed the inside of my mouth and my gums raw trying to match the whiteness of her teeth.

Since meeting her...

That had been, oh, maybe three months ago. I mean, I'd always known her, or known of her. You can't live all your life in a small colliery village and not know everyone, at least by sight. But when she'd left school and got her first job at a salon in Hartlepool, and we'd started catching the same bus in the morning, that had opened it up for us.

After that there'd been a lot of talk, then the cinema, eventually the beach at Seaton, which the debris from the pits hadn't ruined yet, and now we were "going together." It hadn't meant much to me before, that phrase, "going together," but now I understood it. We went places together, and we went well together. I thought so, anyway.

The garden allotments started properly at the end of the colliery wall and sprawled over many acres along the coast road on the northern extreme of the village. The access paths, which divided them, were dusty, mazy, meandering. But behind the fences people were at work, and they came to and fro along the paths, so that it wasn't really private there. I had returned Moira's kiss, and in several quieter places had tried to draw her closer once or twice.

Invariably she held me at arm's length, saying: "Not here!" And her nervousness made me nervous, too, so that I'd look here and there all about, to make sure we were unobserved. And it was at such a time, glancing back the way we'd come, that I thought I saw a face hastily snatched back around the corner of a fence. The thought didn't occur to me that it might be Raymond. By now I'd quite forgotten about him.

Where the allotments ended the open fields began, gradually declining to a dene and a stream that ran down to the sea. A second cigarette had been smoked down to its tip and discarded by the time we crossed the fields along a hedgerow, and we'd fallen silent where we strolled through the long summer grass. But I was aware of my arm, linked with hers, and hugged close against her right breast. And that was a thought which made me dizzy, for through a heady half-hour I had actually held that breast in my hand, had known how warm it was, with its little hard tip that felt rough against the parent softness.

Oh, the back row love-seats in the local cinema were worthy of an award; whoever designed them deserves an accolade from all the world's lovers. Two people on a single, softly upholstered seat, thigh-to-thigh and hip-to-hip, with no ghastly armrest divider, no obstruction to the slow, breathless, tender and timid first invasion.

In the dark with only the cinema's wall behind us, and the smoky beam from the projector turning all else to pitch, I was sure she wasn't aware of my progress with the top button of her blouse, and I considered myself incredibly fortunate to be able to disguise my fumblings with the second of those small obstacles. But after a while, when for all my efforts it appeared I'd get no further and my frustration was mounting as the tingling seconds ticked by, then she'd gently taken my hand away

and effortlessly completed the job for me. She had known -- which, while it took something of the edge off my triumph, nevertheless increased the frisson to new and previously unexplored heights.

Was I innocent? I don't know. Others, younger by a year, had said they knew everything there was to know. Everything! That was a thought.

But in opening that button and making way for my hand, Moira had invited me in, as it were; cuddled up together there in the back row, my hand had molded itself to the shape of her breast and learned every contour better than any actor ever memorized his lines. Even now, a week later, I could form my hand into a cup and feel her flesh filling it again. And desired to feel her filling it again.

Where the hedgerow met a fence at right-angles, we crossed a stile; I was across first and helped Moira down. While I held one hand to steady her, she hitched her short skirt a little to step down from the stile's high platform. It was funny, but I found Moira's legs more fascinating in that skirt than in her bathing costume. And I'd started to notice the heat of my ears -- that they were hot quite apart from the heat of the sun, with a sort of internal burning -- as we more nearly approached our destination. My destination, anyway, where if her feelings matched mine she'd succumb a little more to my seductions.

As we left the stile to take the path down into the dene and toward the sea cliffs, I glanced back the way we'd come. I don't know why. It was just that I had a feeling. And back there, across the fields, but hurrying, I thought... a figure. Raymond? If it was, and if he were to bother us today of all days... I promised myself he'd pay for it with a bloody nose. But on the other hand it could be anybody. Saying nothing of it to Moira, I hurried her through the dene. Cool under the trees, where the sunlight dappled the rough cobbled path, she said:

"What on earth's the hurry, Josh? Are you that eager?"

The way I took her up in my arms and kissed her till I reeled must have answered her question for me; but there were voices here and there along the path, and the place echoed like a tunnel. No, I knew where I wanted to take her.

Toward the bottom of the dene, where it narrowed to a bottleneck of woods and water scooped through the beach banks and tunneled toward the sea, we turned north across an old wooden bridge over the scummy stream and began climbing toward the cliff paths, open fields, and sand holes that lay between us and Easingham Colliery. Up there, in the long grasses of those summer fields, we could be quite alone and Moira would let me make love to her, I hoped. She'd hinted as much, anyway, the last time I walked her home.

Toiling steeply up an earth track, where white sand spilled down from sand holes up ahead, we looked down on the beach -- or what had been a beach before the pit-yakkers came -- and remembered a time when it was almost completely white from the banks and cliffs to the sea. On a palmy summer day like this the sea should

be blue, but it was gray. Its waves broke in a gray froth of scum on a black shore that looked ravaged by cancer -- the cancer of the pits.

The landscape down there could be that of an alien planet: the black beach scarred by streamlets of dully glinting slurry gurgling seaward; concentric tidemarks of congealed froth, with the sick, wallowing sea seeming eager to escape from its own vomit; a dozen sea-coal lorries scattered here and there like ticks on a carcass, their crews shoveling pebble-sized nuggets of the wet, filthy black gold in through open tail-gates, while other vehicles trundled like lice over the rotting black corpse of a moonscape. Sucked up by the sun, gray mists wreathed the whole scene.

"It's worse than I remembered it," I said. "And you were right: we couldn't have walked down there, not even along the foot of the banks. It's just too filthy! And to think: all of that was pure white sand just, oh -- "

" -- Ten years ago?" she said. "Well, maybe not pure white, but it was still a nice beach then, anyway. Yes, I remember. I've seen that beach full of people, the sea bobbing with their heads. My father used to swim there, with me on his chest! I remember it. I can remember things from all the way back to when I was a baby. It's a shame they've done this to it."

"It's actually unsafe," I told her. "There are places they've flagged, where they've put up warning notices. Quicksands of slag and slop and slurry -- gritty black sludge from the pits. And just look at that skyline!"

South lay the colliery at Harden, the perimeter of its works coming close to the banks where they rolled down to the sea, with half-a-dozen of its black spider legs straddling out farther yet. These were the aerial trip-dumpers: conveyor-belts or ski-lifts of slag, endlessly swaying to the rim and tripped there, to tip the refuse of the coke-ovens down onto the smoking wasteland of foreshore; and these were, directly, the culprits of all this desolation. Twenty-four hours a day for fifty years they'd crawled on their high cables, between their spindly towers, great buckets of muck depositing the pus of the earth to corrode a coast. And behind this lower intestine of the works lay the greater pulsating mass of the spider itself: the pit, with its wheel-towers and soaring black chimneys, its mastaba cooling towers and mausoleum coke-ovens. Yellow smoke, gray and black smoke, belching continuously into the blue sky -- or into a sky which looked blue but was in fact polluted, as any rainy day would testify, when white washing on garden lines would turn a streaky gray with the first patter of raindrops.

On the southern horizon, Blackhill was a spiky smudge under a gray haze; north, but closer, Easingham was the same. Viewed from this same position at night, the glow of the coke-ovens, the flare-up and gouting orange steam when white hot coke was hosed down, would turn the entire region into a scene straight from Hell! Satanic mills? They have nothing on a nest of well-established coal mines by the sea....

We reached the top of the banks and passed warning notices telling how from here on they rolled down to sheer cliffs. When I'd been a child, miners used to clamber down the banks to the cliff-edge, hammer stakes into the earth and lower themselves on ropes with baskets to collect gull eggs. Inland, however, the land was flat, where deep grass pasture roved wild all the way from here to the coast road. There were a few farms, but that was all.

We walked half a mile along the cliff path until the fields began to be fenced; where a hedgerow inside the fence, there split the first true field. I paused and turned to Moira. We hadn't seen anyone, hadn't spoken for some time but I suppose her heart, like mine, had been speeding up a little. Not from our efforts, for walking here was easy.

"We can climb the fence, cut along the hedgerow," I suggested, a little breathlessly.

"Why?" Her eyes were wide, naive and yet questioning.

I shrugged. "A... shortcut to the main road?" But I'd made it a question, and I knew I shouldn't leave the initiative to her. Gathering my courage, I added: "Also, we'll -- "

" -- Find a bit of privacy?" Her face was flushed.

I climbed the rough three-bar fence; she followed my example and I helped her down, and knew she'd seen where I could hardly help looking. But she didn't seem to mind. We stayed close to the hedgerow, which was punctuated every twenty-five paces or so with great oaks, and struck inland. It was only when we were away from the fence that I remembered, just before jumping down, that I'd paused a second to scan the land about -- and how for a moment I thought I'd seen someone back along the path. Raymond, I wondered? But in any case, he should lose our trail now.

After some two hundred yards there was a lone elder tree growing in the field a little way apart from the hedge, its branches shading the lush grass underneath. I led Moira away from the hedge and into the shade of the elder, and she came unresisting. And there I spread my jacket for her to sit on, and for a minute or two we just sprawled. The grass hid us almost completely in our first private place. Seated, we could just see the topmost twigs of the hedgerow, and of course the bole and spreading canopy of the nearest oak.

Now, I don't intend to go into details. Anyone who was ever young, alone with his girl, will know the details anyway. Let it suffice to say that there were things I wanted, some of which she was willing to give. And some she wasn't. "No," she said. And more positively: "No!" when I persisted. But she panted and moaned a little all the same, and her voice was almost desperate, suggesting: "But I can do it for you this way, if you like." Ah, but her hands set me on fire! I burned for her, and she felt the strength of the flame rising in me. "Josh, no!" she said again. "What if...

if..."

She looked away from me, froze for a moment -- and her mouth fell open. She drew air hissing and expelled it in a gasp. "Josh!" And without pause she was doing up buttons, scrambling to her feet, brushing away wisps of grass from her skirt and blouse.

"Eh?" I said, astonished. "What is it?"

"He saw us!" she gasped. "He saw you -- me -- like that!" Her voice shook with a mixture of outrage and fear.

"Who?" I said, mouth dry, looking this way and that and seeing no one. "Where?"

"By the oak tree," she said. "Half-way up it. A face, peering out from behind. Someone was watching us."

Someone? Only one someone it could possibly be! But be sure that when I was done with him he'd never peep on anyone again! Flushed and furious I sprinted through the grass for the oak tree. The hedge hid a rotting fence; I went over, through it, came to a panting halt in fragments of brown, broken timber. No sign of anyone. You could hide an army in that long grass. But the fence where it was nailed to the oak bore the scuffmarks of booted feet, and the tree's bark was freshly bruised some six feet up the bole.

"You... dog!" I growled to myself. "God, but I'll get you, Raymond Maddison!"

"Josh!" I heard Moira on the other side of the "hedge. "Josh, I'm so -- ashamed!"

"What?" I called out. "Of what? He won't dare say anything -- whoever he is. There are laws against -- ". But she was no longer there. Forcing myself through soft wooden jaws and freeing myself from the tangle of the hedge, I saw her hurrying back the way we'd come. "Moira!" I called, but she was already halfway to the three-bar fence. "Moira!" I called again, and then ran after her. By the time I reached the fence she'd climbed it and was starting back along the path.

I finally caught up with her, took her arm. "Moira, we can find some other place. I mean, just because -- "

She shook me off, turned on me. "Is that all you want, Josh Peters?" Her face was angry now, eyes flashing. "Well if it is, there are plenty of other girls in Harden who'll be more than happy to... to..."

"Moira, I -- " I shook my head. It wasn't like that. We were going together.

"I thought you liked me\" she snapped. "The real me!"

My jaw fell open. Why was she talking to me like this? She knew I liked -- more than liked -- the real Moira. She was the real Moira! It was a tiff, brought on by excitement, fear, frustration; we'd never before had to deal with anything like this, and we didn't know how. Hers heightened my emotions, and now my pride took over. I thrust my jaw out, turned on my heel and strode rapidly away from her.

"If that's what you think of me," I called back, " -- if that's as much as you think of me -- then maybe this is for the best..."

"Josh?" I heard her small voice behind me. But I didn't answer, didn't look back.

Furious, I hurried, almost trotted back the way we'd come: along the cliff path, scrambling steeply down through the grass-rimmed, crumbling sand pits to the dene. But at the bottom I deliberately turned left and headed for the beach. Dirty? Oh, the beach would be dirty -- sufficiently dirty so that she surely wouldn't follow me. I didn't want her to. I wanted nothing of her. Oh, I did, I did! -- But I wouldn't admit it, not even to myself, not then. But if she did try to follow me, it would mean... it would mean...

Moira, Moira! Did I love her? Possibly, but I couldn't handle the emotion. So many emotions; and inside I was still on fire from what had nearly been, still aching from the retention of fluids my young body had so desired to be rid of. Raymond? Raymond Maddison? By God, but I'd bloody him! I'd let some of his damned fluids out!

"Josh!" I seemed to hear Moira's voice from a long way back, but I could have been mistaken. In any case it didn't slow me down. Time and space flashed by in a blur; I was down onto the beach; I walked south under the cliffs on sand that was still sand, however blackened; I trekked grimy sand dunes up and down, kicking at withered tufts of crabgrass which reminded me of the gray and yellow hairs sprouting from the blemishes of old men. Until finally I had burned something of the anger and frustration out of myself.

Then I turned toward the sea, cut a path between the sickly dunes down to the no-man's land of black slag and stinking slurry, and found a place to sit on a rock etched by chemical reaction into an anomalous hump. It was one of a line of rocks I remembered from my childhood, reaching out half a mile to the sea, from which the men had crabbed and cast their lines. But none of that now. Beyond where I sat, only the tips of the lifeless, once limpet- and mussel-festooned rocks stuck up above the slurry; a leaning, blackened signpost warned:

DANGER! QUICKSAND!
Do Not Proceed Beyond This Point.

Quicksand? Quag, certainly, but not sand...

I don't know how long I sat there. The sea was advancing and gray gulls wheeled on high, crying on a rising breeze that blew their plaintive voices inland.

Scummy waves broke in feathers of gray froth less than one hundred yards down the beach. Down what had been a beach before the invasion of the pit-yakkers. It was summer but down here there were no seasons. Steam curled up from the slag and misted a pitted, alien landscape.

I became lulled by the sound of the birds, the hissing throb of foamy waters, and, strangely, from some little distance away, the periodic clatter of an aerial dumper tilting its buckets and hurling more mineral debris down from on high, creating a mound which the advancing ocean would spread out in a new layer to coat and further contaminate the beach.

I sat there glumly, with my chin like lead in my hands and all of these sounds dull on the periphery of my consciousness, and thought nothing in particular and certainly nothing of any importance. From time to time a gull's cry would sound like Moira's voice, but too shrill, high, frightened, or desperate. She wasn't coming, wouldn't come, and I had lost her. We had lost each other.

I became aware of time trickling by, but again I state: I don't know how long I sat there. An hour? Maybe.

Then something broke through to me. Something other than the voices of the gulls, the waves, the near-distant rain of stony rubble. A new sound? A presence? I looked up, turned my head to scan north along the dead and rotting beach. And I saw him -- though as yet he had not seen me.

My eyes narrowed and I felt my brows come together in a frown. Raymond Maddison. The pit-yakker himself. And this probably as good a place as any, maybe better than most, to teach him a well-deserved lesson. I stood up, and keeping as low a profile as possible made my way round the back of the tarry dunes to where he was standing. In less than two minutes I was there, behind him, creeping up on where he stood wind-blown and almost forlorn-seeming, staring out to sea. And there I paused.

It seemed his large, rounded shoulders were heaving. Was he crying? Catching his breath? Gulping at the warm, reeking air? Had he been running? Searching for me? Following me as earlier he'd followed us? My feelings hardened against him. It was because he wasn't entirely all there that people tolerated him. But I more than suspected he was all there. Not really a dummy, more a scummy.

And I had him trapped. In front of him the rocks receding into pits of black filth, where a second warning notice leaned like a scarecrow on a battlefield, and behind him... only myself behind him. Me and my tightly clenched fists.

Then, as I watched, he took something out of his pocket. His new knife, as I saw now. He stared down at it for a moment, and then drew back his arm as if to hurl it away from him, out into the black wilderness of quag. But he froze like that, with the knife still in his hand, and I saw that his shoulders had stopped shuddering. He became alert; I guessed that he'd sensed I was there, watching him.

He turned his head and saw me, and his eyes opened wide in a pale, slack face. I'd never seen him so pale. Then he fell to one knee, dipped his knife into the slurry at his feet, and commenced wiping at it with a rag of a handkerchief. Caught unawares he was childlike, tending to do meaningless things.

"Raymond," I said, my voice grimmer than I'd intended. "Raymond, I want a word with you!" And he looked for somewhere to run as I advanced on him. But there was nowhere.

"I didn't -- " he suddenly blurted. "I didn't -- "

"But you did!" I was only a few paces away.

"I... I..."

"You followed us, peeped on us, and messed it all up."

And again he seemed to freeze, while his brain turned over what I'd said to him. Lines creased his brow, vanishing as quickly as they'd come. "What?"

"What?!" I shouted, stepping closer still. "You bloody well know what! Now Moira and me, we're finished. And it's your fault."

He backed off into the black mire, which at once covered his boots and the cuffs of his too-short trousers. And there he stood, lifting and lowering his feet, which went glop, glop with each up and down movement. He reminded me of nothing so much as a fly caught on the sticky paper they used at that time. And his mouth kept opening and closing, stupidly, because he had nothing to say and nowhere to run, and he knew I was angry.

Finally he said: "I didn't mean to... follow you. But I -- " And he reached into a pocket and brought out a packet of cigarettes. "Your cigarettes."

I had known that would be his excuse. "Throw them to me, Ray," I said. For I wasn't about to go stepping in there after him. He tossed me the packet but stayed right where he was, "You may as well come on out," I told him, lighting up, "for you know I'm going to settle with you."

"Josh," he said, still mouthing like a fish. "Josh...."

"Yes, Josh, Josh," I told him, nodding. "But you've really done it this time, and we have to have it out."

He still had his knife. He showed it to me, opened the main blade. He took a

pace forward out of the slurry and I took a pace back. There was a sick grin on his face. Except... he wasn't threatening me. "For you," he said, snapping the blade shut. "I don't... don't want it no more." He stepped from the quag onto a flat rock and stood there facing me, not quite within arm's reach. He tossed the knife and I automatically caught it. It weighed heavy in my hand where I clenched my knuckles round it.

"A bribe?" I said. "So that I won't tell what you did? How many friends do you have, Ray? And how many left if I tell what a dirty, sneaky, spying -- "

But he was still grinning his sick, nervous grin. "You won't tell," he shook his head. "Not what I seen."

I made a lunging grab for him and the grin slipped from his face. He hopped to a second rock farther out in the liquid slag, teetered there for a moment before finding his balance. And he looked anxiously all about for more stepping-stones, in case I should follow.

There were two or three more rocks, all of them deeper into the coal dust quicksand, but beyond them only a bubbly, oozy black surface streaked with oil and yellow mineral swirls.

Raymond's predicament was a bad one. Not because of me. I would only hit him. Once or twice, depending how long it took to bloody him. But this stuff would murder him. If he fell in. And the black slime was dripping from the bottoms of his trousers, making the surface of his rock slippery. Raymond's balance wasn't much, neither mentally nor physically. He began to slither this way and that, wind-milled his arms in an effort to stay put.

"Ray!" I was alarmed. "Come out of there!"

He leaped, desperately, tried to find purchase on the next rock, slipped! His feet shot up in the air and he came down on his back in the quag. The stuff quivered like thick black porridge and put out slow-motion ripples. He flailed his arms, yelping like a dog, as the lower part of his body started to sink. His trousers ballooned with the air in them, but the stuff's suck was strong. Raymond was going down.

Before I could even start to think straight he was in chest deep, the filth inching higher every second. But he'd stopped yelping and had started thinking. Thinking desperate thoughts. "Josh... Josh!" he gasped.

I stepped forward ankle-deep, got up onto the first rock. I made to jump to the second rock but he stopped me. "No, Josh," he whispered. "Or we'll both go."

"You're sinking," I said, for once as stupid as him.

"Listen," he answered with a gasp. "Up between the dunes, some cable, half-buried. I saw it on my way down here. Tough, 'lectric wire, in the muck. You

can pull me out with that."

I remembered. I had seen it, too. Several lengths of discarded cable, buried in the scummy dunes. All my limbs were trembling as I got back to solid ground, setting out up the beach between the dunes. "Josh!" his voice reached out harshly after me. "Hurry!" And a moment later: "The first bit of wire you see, that'll do it...."

I hurried, ran, raced. But my heart was pounding, the air rasping like sandpaper in my lungs. Fear. But... I couldn't find the cable. Then there was a tall dune, a great heap of black-streaked, slag-crusting sand. A lookout place! I went up it, my feet breaking through the crust, letting rivulets of sand cascade, thrusting myself to the top. Now I could get directions, scan the area all about. Over there, between low humps of diseased sand, I could see what might be a cable: a thin, frozen black snake of the stuff.

But beyond the cable I could see something else: colors, anomalous, strewn in a clump of dead crabgrass.

I tumbled down the side of the great dune, ran for the cable, and tore a length free of the sand and muck. I had maybe fifteen, twenty feet of the stuff. Coiling it, I looked back. Raymond was there in the quag, going down black and sticky. But in the other direction -- just over there, no more than a dozen loping paces away, hidden in the crabgrass and low humps of sand -- something blue and white and... and red.

Something about it made my skin prickle. Quickly, I went to see. And I saw...

After a while I heard Raymond's voice over the crying of the gulls. "Josh! Josh\."

I walked back, the cable looped in my lifeless hands, made my way to where he hung crucified in the quag; his arms formed the cross, palms pressing down on the belching surface, his head thrown back and the slop ringing his throat. And I stood looking at him. He saw me; saw the cable in my limp hands, looked into my eyes. And he knew. He knew I wasn't going to let him have the cable.

Instead I gave him back his terrible knife with all its terrible attachments -- which he'd been waiting to use, and which I'd seen no use for -- tossing it so that it landed in front of him and splashed a blob of slime into his right eye.

He pleaded with me for a little while then, but there was no excuse. I sat and smoked, without even remembering lighting my fresh cigarette, until he began to gurgle. The black filth flooded his mouth, nostrils, and the circles of his eyes. He went down, his sputtering mouth forming a ring in the muck, which slowly filled in when he was gone. Big shiny bubbles came bursting to the surface....

When my cigarette went out I began to cry, and crying staggered back up the beach between the dunes. To Moira.

Moir. Something I'd had -- almost -- which he didn't have. Which he could never have, except like this. Jealousy, or just sheer evil? And was I any better than him, now? I didn't know then, and I don't know to this day. He was just a pit-yakker, born for the pit. Him and roe both, I suppose, but I had been lucky enough to escape it.

And he hadn't....