

NIGHT CALL

David Michael Kaplan, award winner

"YOUR SON HAS been terrorizing your daughter again," Ellen said as soon as he walked through the door. She was sitting cross-legged on the rug in front of the cherrywood coffee table; book, paper, and coins—pennies this time—were spread before her. Incense assaulted his nostrils.

The *I Ching* again, Randall thought. Like some damn college freshman.

"He's been telling her ghost stories," Ellen continued. "She had a hard time going to sleep. I had to sit with her awhile."

Randall sighed. Always some problem, he thought, always. He had worked late, there had been an accident on the freeway, and it was hot both indoors and out. He put his briefcase by the sofa and sat down.

"What ghost stories?" he asked.

"Something about Mr. Green—the Sandy Man. I never heard of this before. I'm sure he made it up." She tossed the coins on the table, studied them, then drew a broken line on the sheet of paper.

Randall took off his shoes. "So who's Mr. Green? What does he do?"

"He's made of sand and comes through keyholes and windows at night. You know—just sort of *pours* in. Then he re-forms and smothers you in your sleep." Ellen laughed.

"He's creative, our boy," Randall said.

"Karen told me that Kevin saw him in their room one night, 'his eyes like a mad dog's'. Kevin's words." She spread her hands. "Where does he get all this?"

"From you," Randall said, sweeping his hand to include the coins, the papers, the *I Ching*. "From his spooky mother."

She tossed the coins and drew another line. "Karen was terrified. She had me close the window. She was afraid he'd come pouring in. And of course Kevin was egging her on. I could've slugged him."

"It's simple enough," Randall said. "He hates her, that's all. Per-

factly Freudian, perfectly normal.” And she would scare so easily, he thought. Even as a baby, Karen had been fearful, watchful; in this she resembled him. Often Randall woke in the night, alert and straining, certain that he had heard something move within the house. He told himself it was his imagination, but still, he listened. Sometimes he would get up and walk through the house, turning on lights as he went, coughing to give warning, until he was satisfied no one—and nothing—was there.

“I’ll go look in on her,” he said.

“If she’s asleep, open the window,” Ellen said. “It must be stifling in there.”

The Snoopy night-light cast a pale glow in the room. Outside the closed window, a frog croaked in the bushes. Both children were asleep. Kevin lay flat on his back, legs sprawled, head turned to the wall. He wore no pajama top. In spite of the heat, Karen had wrapped the sheet around her. Randall touched her forehead where a small vein throbbed. She shivered, and he quickly withdrew his hand. He went over to the window and opened it. The frog stopped croaking. In the backyard Randall could see his tool shed, garbage cans, the children’s swing set, the fence, and beyond these, his neighbor’s backdoor light which illuminated them all. Everything was as it should be, and nothing else was there.

When he returned to the living room, Ellen had drawn out a new hexagram on a sheet of paper.

“So what does it say?” he asked, peering over her shoulder.

She didn’t look up. “I don’t think you’re really interested.”

He took the *I Ching* from her hands; she held only a little then let go. “Number 62,” he read. “‘The Small Get By’ . . . interesting. Let’s read it.”

“Oh, why don’t you just put it down,” Ellen said wearily.

“This hexagram symbolizes thunder over the mountains,” he read aloud. “‘The Superior Man now acts with too much reverence, experiences too much sorrow—’”

“Why do you always make fun of this?” Ellen interrupted.

“Because it’s crazy!” he said. “Why do you do this craziness? Answer me that.”

She shifted her legs. “Something’s got to tell me what’s going on.”

“And I suppose I don’t?”

She shrugged.

“You can’t talk to me, right?” Randy said, his voice rising. “It’s that again. You—”

The phone rang.

“I’ll get it,” he said. “You just sit there. You can throw some more

coins.”

Randall didn't bother to turn on the kitchen light. Flames from the pilot lights beneath the burners cast small shadows on the ceiling. He picked up the receiver in mid-ring.

“Hello?”

Randall heard crackling, like butter sizzling in a pan, then some clicks.

“Hello?” he repeated. “Anybody there?”

“Hello?” Over the static, a man's voice echoed his.

“Yes?” Randall said. “Who's this?”

“Randall Curtin? Is this Randall Curtin?”

Randall strained to recognize the voice. “Yes. Who's this?”

No response.

“Can you hear me?” Randall asked. The crackling disappeared for a moment.

“Randy,” the voice said, “this is—” But the name was obscured by the static.

“You'll have to talk louder—it's a bad connection,” Randall said.

“Alvan Shoafsts!” the voice said.

Who? Randall wondered.

“From Staunton Academy,” the caller added: Randall heard this clearly. Staunton was the prep school he had attended twenty-odd years ago. He felt himself drifting backward across time and a continent, to a quadrangle in winter sunlight, his books cupped in frozen fingers because he refused to wear gloves. Snow is always falling in his memories of Staunton, and his hands are always cold. But he couldn't remember an Alvan Shoafsts.

The line crackling subsided to a gentle hiss. “Do you remember me?” Alvan Shoafsts asked, his voice suddenly much closer.

“No—I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't. Did you say you were *with* the Academy or you *went* there?” Asking for money, Randall thought: this was the first time they'd ever called.

Again, there was no immediate answer, as if a time delay existed between sides of their conversation. Then Alvan Shoafsts laughed, short and barking, more a wheeze than a laugh.

“I was a sophomore the year you were senior proctor,” he said. “I lived down the hall from you. In Kulle House. I was there just one year.”

Randall remembered the tired old dormitory that smelled of varnish, stale sheets, and cheap after-shave. During winter the roof crackled with snow, and steam heat made the air metallic. More than sixty boys had lived in Kulle House; as one of three senior proctors, Randall had had modest disciplinary responsibilities. Now he roamed the halls in memory, but still couldn't find Alvan Shoafsts. He was

embarrassed.

"I'm sorry—help me out a bit more," he said.

"Don't feel bad," the voice said soothingly. "There's no real reason to remember me. Like I said, I was only there one year. And I was a sophomore, and you were a senior and all, so we couldn't really be friends." He paused. "But I remember you, oh, yes I do. I looked up to you. You caught me smoking once and didn't turn me in. Do you remember that?"

"No," Randall said.

"You were a good senior proctor."

"Oh, sure, I remember you now," Randall lied.

"Do you?" Alvan sounded pleased. "Or are you just saying that? You don't have to pretend, you know. It doesn't hurt my feelings."

"No—really—I think I do remember you. Alvan Shoaf. Sure. It's been a long time."

"I mean, there's nothing wrong with forgetting," Alvan said.

"Well—how've you been, Alvan?"

"What do you mean?" He sounded puzzled.

"I mean, since Staunton."

"Oh—" He laughed. "I'll tell you all about that later, Randy."

Randall looked impatiently at the stove clock. It's time to move this along, he thought.

"So—Alvan—what can I do for you?"

"Well, I'm calling on official business, Randy. Official school business, you could say. I—listen—do you hear clicking? On the line? Listen."

Randall listened. The clicking had returned. "Yeah—bad connection. There—it's gone again."

"But you did hear it?"

"Sure. Why?"

Alvan didn't reply.

"Hello?" Randall said.

"I'm here, Randy."

"So what's this official business?" Randall asked. Money for the school?"

"First, Randy, before I forget, there's something I've been meaning to tell you, the next time we talked. You may not remember much about me, but I remember a lot about you. What you did at Staunton. Your accomplishments—" His voice trailed away, then returned. "I'm trying to say I admired you, Randy. I always thought that if ever there was a person who should succeed, who should have the good things in life, it should be you. Randall Curtin. There—I've said it. I hope this doesn't embarrass you."

"Well, no . . . I . . ."

"I've followed your progress for a long time, Randy. Through mutual acquaintances, the alumni journal, other ways. You know they send me the alumni journal even though I was only there that one year? Isn't that amazing? They keep good tabs on you. Anyway—I know a lot about what you've been up to these years. I've been doing some research behind your back. I hope that's OK?"

"What do you mean, research?" Randall asked.

"Well, I know before California you lived in Danville, Virginia. And you're married to the former Ellen Cheney—I bet you haven't forgotten her name, eh? And you've got two kids, a boy and a girl, right, Randy?"

"That's right," Randall said.

"I hope this doesn't upset you. I'd feel terrible if you thought badly of me, going behind your back."

What is he talking about? Randall thought.

"I know other things about you too, Randy," Alvan said.

"What things?" Randall asked uneasily. The darkened kitchen seemed oppressive; he tried to reach the light switch, but—tethered to the phone cord—he couldn't.

"I bet she's really good for you," Alvan said. "Ellen, I mean. If anybody would marry good, it would be you. And you deserve it. I bet your kids are real nice too, Randy." He paused. "Aren't they?"

"Yes," Randall said. "They are. Look—"

Ellen walked into the kitchen and flicked on the light. Randall watched her spread peanut butter on a slice of whole-grain bread. She raised her eyebrows as if to ask was it anybody she knew on the phone. Randall shook his head, then rolled his eyes to indicate frustration. He shook the receiver in mock strangulation, and grinned at her. When she went out—to his dismay—she flicked off the light again.

"I never married," Alvan was saying. "I never finished college either. Oh, I was in and out of a lot of colleges. Colleges and more colleges. They just couldn't sustain my interest, do you know what I mean?" He sighed. "It was all a mistake anyway. Now my records are everywhere, Randy. They're all stored on tapes somewhere."

"Alvan—"

"Does this interest you, Randy? Talking about me?"

"Alvan—" Randall's voice was sharp— "it's late. Why are you calling? Just tell me."

"I'm getting to that, Randy. But listen—can I be honest with you? I'm a little concerned about the noise on this line. I have been from the beginning."

"Why?" Randall asked.

"Randy, I don't want to alarm you, but—do you think your phone

might be tapped?"

Randall was stunned. "What are you talking about? Of course it's not tapped!"

"That's not as strange a question as you might think, Randy. If you knew the business I'm in—well, it makes you cautious. Let's just leave it at that. My phone's tapped, you know. That's why I'm calling you from a pay phone. But I don't know about your phone."

Randall heard hissing, and behind it a faint electronic chattering. His neighbor's light went off, plunging the backyard into darkness.

"Alvan—I—just what business are you in?"

"Government business, Randy. Secrets. I couldn't tell you that right off. And I can't tell you everything. But that's really why I'm calling. It's on government business."

Randall took a breath. "OK, Alvan, just tell me what it is then, OK? Tell me why you called. I don't know about any wire-tapping, or—"

"I don't mean to upset you, Randy," Alvan interrupted. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't talk about phone taps. It upsets people. Let's just let it pass, OK? It's very difficult for me right now. For you too. I—haven't told you the whole truth, Randy. I've done certain things behind your back. But for your own good. When you know everything, I hope you'll understand."

Randall's uneasiness knotted in his chest.

"What things, Alvan?"

No response.

"Alvan?"

His voice returned from darkness. "I try to do good, Randy. That's the only reason I'm calling you, is to do good. To warn you."

"Warn me about what?"

"Is everything OK there, Randy? With you and your family?"

"Of course it is. What—"

"Well, thank God for that," Alvan said. "Because you're in danger."

Randall felt something safe and familiar fall away, like a stone into the sea. For a moment, he couldn't speak. "What danger, Alvan?" he said at last.

"Is Ellen OK, Randy?" Alvan's saying her name so familiarly made Randall flinch.

"Look, Alvan—"

"I can see things that are going to happen, Randy. Even when I don't want to. I have a—a power. And a few weeks ago—I forget when exactly, or where I was, or what I was doing—I thought, I just knew, *Randy's in danger*. I waited to see if the feeling went away, because I didn't want to alarm you. But it just got stronger. And then I knew that I had to warn you."

He's crazy, Randall thought. Crazy.

"There's no danger," he said tensely.

"Maybe it's your kids then, Randy. Maybe there's some danger there. Because I feel it, I really do. I wouldn't bother you if I didn't."

Randall's uneasiness changed to a fear—small, hard, and cold.

"My kids are fine," he said.

"I guess it just hasn't happened yet—"

"What hasn't?" Randall's voice rose.

A pause. Alvan sighed. "I could tell you more, Randy. But not now."

"What? What could you tell me?"

Again, a pause, static, a hiss. Randall realized where he had heard such communication before: between ground control and astronauts circling the moon.

"I can't speak freely now," Alvan said. "But there's danger all around you."

"Alvan, I'm going to have to go—"

"Are you upset with me, Randy?" Alvan sounded solicitous. "Maybe I shouldn't have called. I could've just let things happen, but I thought what kind of friend would I be—"

"Alvan—I'm going to hang up."

"I've upset you, Randy, I can tell. We shouldn't talk about this anymore right now. I don't want to upset you. I just want to help. We can talk again later, maybe."

To whom was he actually talking? Randall wondered. Only a voice who called himself Alvan Shoaf, whom Randall couldn't remember anyway.

"Alvan—did you really go to Staunton?"

"I thought you said you remembered me," Alvan said. "Were you lying, Randy?"

Randall closed his eyes, willing calmness.

"How can you set an example, Randy, if you lie? How can you set a good example for your kids? How can you be a good senior proctor?"

A pain throbbed in Randall's temple. And with the pain, suddenly, a new, terrible fear. "Alvan—where are you? Where are you calling from?"

"Why do you want to know, Randy?"

I must be careful, Randall thought. He must hide this fear like an animal masks its spoor. "I just wondered," he said. "You didn't say."

A pause. "I can't tell you that, Randy."

"Alvan—look—" Randall massaged his pain—"if it's wiretaps you're worried about—nobody's tapping my phone. Believe me."

"How do you know that, Randy?"

"I—Alvan—it's just your imagination."

"How do you know that, Randy? Let me tell you something you may not know. There are people out there—important people—who want to keep tabs on me. Because of what I know. Not just about you. Not just about your petty problems. There're a lot more important people than you, Randy!"

"Alvan—there aren't any wiretaps!"

"Why are you trying so hard to convince me?" Alvan asked suspiciously.

Randall couldn't answer.

"Do you think I'm crazy, Randy?" Alvan asked. "You can tell me. I've always respected your opinions. You do think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"No—I—"

"Don't lie, Randy. Don't lie anymore. I can tell. You think I'm crazy. Go ahead—it won't hurt my feelings."

Randall stopped massaging his temples. "It just sounds—to me anyway—like maybe—you might need some help."

"Help?"

"Someone to talk to, I mean."

"Well, I'm talking with you, Randy."

"But I can't help you!" Randall cried. "Why did you call me? I don't even know you!"

"I thought you said you remembered me," Alvan said. "So you did lie."

Randall clenched the receiver.

"You're the one who needs help, Randy. Did you forget? Did you forget why I called? Don't you listen? The danger—"

"Alvan, I can't talk anymore," Randall said.

"You think that you're above everything, the great Randall Curtin—"

"Alvan, this is pointless."

"I tried, Randy. I tried to tell you some things. So you wouldn't be surprised by what's going to happen."

Again, the fear. "What, Alvan? What's going to happen?"

"We'll talk more later, Randy. When you're less upset. I'll call you."

"I don't want to talk with you, Alvan."

"We could have a—a dialog."

Behind the electronic hiss, Randall could faintly hear other voices, other conversations. "Where are you, Alvan?" he asked. "Tell me!"

"Somewhere," Alvan replied in a child's sing-song voice. "Can't say." He paused, and Randall, straining, could hear nothing now but the constant, insinuating hiss. And then Alvan spoke again: "You

know, Randy, my voice is travelling right now on electric waves at the speed of light. Wave after wave, at the speed of light! It travels around the world many times before it gets to you. So—you could say I'm everywhere then, couldn't you?"

From the corner of his eye, Randall saw a shape by the kitchen entryway, and started. It was Ellen. She tilted her head questioningly. She must have heard my voice rise, Randall thought. He waved her away. She shrugged, and she went.

"I'll stay in better touch, Randy," Alvan said. "I won't wait so long next time."

Randall could say nothing.

"You know, Randy, in a lot of ways I think we're alike. I wouldn't have said that back at Staunton. There were differences then. But now I think maybe it's true."

"Do you?" Randall murmured. And hung up. He waited. He put his face close to the window and stared at the hunched shadows of all that was his: garbage cans, tool shed, swing set, fence. He inventoried everything. He waited. The refrigerator turned on, startling him. The phone didn't ring.

He checked the kitchen door to make sure it was locked, then walked down the hall to the children's room. Karen's head seemed twisted at a terrible, unnatural angle. She turned in her sleep and clutched the edge of the pillow. Randall clenched his fist, as if he were clutching it too. He closed the window he had opened earlier.

Ellen was sitting on the sofa, head bent, her back to him. It would be so easy to scare her, he thought. He approached softly from behind, but she must have heard.

"Why are you sneaking up that way?" she asked.

He grinned. "Just to scare you."

She put down her magazine. "Who was that on the phone?"

"Nobody," he said, crossing the room to the front door. "An old prep school friend. We hadn't talked in twenty years." Randall tried the door: it was open.

"How come this door's unlocked?" he asked.

"We haven't gone to bed yet."

He locked it.

"Why did he call?" she asked. "Your friend."

"To talk about things. He's going through a bad time." He sat in the chair across from her and smiled.

"And so he called you. After twenty years."

"Yep."

"Your voice got loud."

"Were you listening in on me?" he snapped.

"What is going on with you?" she asked.

"Why are you asking so many questions? Why don't you just ask the *I Ching*?"

They sat for awhile in silence. At last Ellen said, "If I didn't think you'd jump at me, I'd ask you what you're thinking."

"I'll tell you," Randall said after a pause. "I've been thinking about all the empty space inside an atom."

She looked at him quizzically.

"It's mostly empty in there, you know. There's as much empty space in every atom as there is in the entire solar system. Relatively speaking." Randall began talking more rapidly. "Now in the center, of course, it's really crowded, what with all those protons and neutrons and God knows what else. But—" he shook warningly— "don't let that fool you. It's still mostly empty space in there." He folded his hands, a schoolboy finished with his recitation. "And that's what I've been thinking." He grinned. "Pretty scary, huh? Thinking about it could drive you crazy."

"Then don't," she said. "Just don't think about it."

"That's the answer, I suppose? That's what the *I Ching* would say?"

"Yes," she said. "That's the answer." She looked straight at him as she spoke, but Randall could tell even as she said it that she was wrong, she didn't believe this at all, she was only saying it—and besides, she was frightened too.