

A Greater Power

By

Benjamin Crowell

Sean knew he wasn't the kind of guy who got a lot of breaks in life, and that was why he wanted to make real sure of keeping the house-sitting gig. Rich Chinese guy, here he had this fancy house on seventeen acres in the mountains, but he hardly ever came around except in the summer. Sean didn't live there full time, but it was cool to have a place to go and get away from other people, plus the money was pretty good, considering that the job wasn't much work.

So when the white hazy crud showed up in the deep end of Mr. Wang's pool, it wasn't the kind of thing Sean was just going to blow off. He put in a bunch more chlorine tabs, got a sample of the water, and drove right down to Scotts Valley and got the sample tested at the pool store. They told him nothing was goofy with the chemistry stuff, and he was probably doing the right thing by just putting in more chlorine. Maybe run the filter pump for a couple extra hours every day until it cleared up.

After that he probably did get a little sloppy. It was February, and normally the pool was real easy to take care of in the winter. He and Mike took off to do some surfing down at Cowell's Cove, which was excellent because nobody was around that time of year. The next day they flew back up HWY 17 like a cruise missile in Sean's truck with Donna Summer blasting on the eight-track. That would have got Sean back in plenty of time to drop by Wang's place and check on how the pool was doing, but stuff came up. For one thing, the minute he got in the door of the room he was renting the phone rang, and it was Cindy bugging him about the child support. Sometimes she didn't really seem to get the concept that they were divorced.

By the time he got a chance to check the pool, a week had gone by, and it was worse, not better. It was nighttime, but with the outdoor lights on he could tell that there was even more of the white haze, and a smell like butterscotch. The smell made him queasy because he happened to be a little hung over. He noticed both of the floating holders for the chlorine tablets lying out on the deck instead of in the water. What was going on? He remembered putting them in the water - at least he thought he did. He tossed them back in the water. He went to pull the basket out of the skimmer, and then heard something skitter across the deck behind him. He jumped and yelled, and when he turned around, one of the chlorine floats was back on the deck, spinning around like a cockeyed top. He looked at the water, and saw something white sweeping around on the surface. At first he thought it was someone's arm, but it was way too skinny, and it curved and waved like a rope. It found the other float and coiled around it.

Sean ran back to his truck and jumped in. He ran over some of Mr. Wang's

bushes turning around in the driveway, and then burned rubber out of there.

Back out on Summit Road, he was still going a little too fast, and that was how he got pulled over by Paul Hollis.

"See your license and registration, Sean?"

Sean handed them over. There was no way he was going to wiggle out of this one. He'd known Paul since third grade, but now Paul was Cindy's boyfriend, and probably believed whatever she said about Sean. Well, he was damned if he'd yessir-nosir him.

"Your headlights are off," Paul said.

"Oops." Sean turned them on. Jesus, what could that thing in the pool have been?

"Could you step out of the vehicle, please?" Sean got out. "You been drinking, Sean?"

"Oh, I see what you're thinking." He'd had a Colt 45 to get rid of the hangover, but he knew for sure that he was sober. "No, I just had a scare. I was cleaning Wang's pool, and some kind of an animal jumped at me."

But Paul made him walk heel to toe and all of that, and damned if Sean didn't end up in the county jail. Some people get a lot of breaks, and others don't. Since he'd had a couple of DUIs before, the judge said he had to see a probation officer and go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. He lost his license, and because of that he lost his job delivering the Chronicle. Without that job, he was short on money, and he couldn't afford to pay for the room he'd been renting, so after the end of the month he ended up living in Mr. Wang's house full time until he could get back on his feet again.

He convinced himself that he hadn't seen what he thought he'd seen in the pool – convinced himself enough to sleep in the house, and later on convinced himself enough to go out and look in the pool. He went out in the afternoon in Mr. Wang's bathrobe and sat on Mr. Wang's plastic lounge chair and stared at the pool with his chin in his hands. The bathrobe wasn't quite wide enough in the waist to go around his belly.

The stinking, messed up pool seemed just like his stinking, messed up life. The people at the A.A. meetings all acted like they were totally ashamed of how bad they'd messed things up, but the messed up versions of their lives actually didn't seem as bad as the old, normal version of Sean's. At least they were really alcoholics, so they had an excuse.

He cried a little, and then he noticed he was feeling dizzy. The butterscotch smell was strong. He lay down on the lounge chair, and closed his eyes to try to make the dizziness go away. After a while he felt peaceful. Had he fallen asleep for a minute? He opened his eyes, and noticed that there was a pale white tentacle lying on the pool deck, and the end of it was in his mouth. It didn't hurt. He could tell it was in his throat, but he hadn't even felt it going down. He thought about it, and he decided that the other end of the tentacle was in the pool. That seemed right. The tentacle was sort of throbbing. The sensation in his throat felt almost like swallowing, except it wasn't Sean's own throat muscles that were doing it. His own muscles were totally relaxed. As an experiment, he tried wiggling his toes. It didn't seem to work, but that didn't worry him too much. He felt relaxed and good.

After the tentacle withdrew, he lay there on the lounge chair for a while, feeling peaceful. Things didn't seem so bad. What was it he'd been worried about, anyway?

After a while he decided it was time to go to his A.A. meeting. Walking to and from the meetings took a long time, but it wasn't like he had a lot of other stuff to do. On the way, he started to think about what had happened. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed strange. Wouldn't most people have freaked out when something put a tentacle down their throat? By the time he got to the American Legion hall where they had the meetings, he had his thoughts put together enough to be sure that his reaction hadn't been normal. If he told other people what had happened and how he'd acted, he knew it wouldn't make sense to them.

At the meeting, Floyd Houska surprised Sean by saying he wanted him to think about doing "ninety in ninety." That meant Sean would go to a meeting every single day for ninety days. Floyd would be his sponsor, and would keep in close touch with him. While Floyd was explaining it, Sean started to think about how to say no, and probably he would have said no normally, but somehow he was in a different mood now. Floyd was a skinny, tall old guy, with a red nose and spiderwebby veins on his face. Floyd had been a minister until he messed things up with his drinking.

It wasn't that Sean suddenly felt more sympathetic than he used to about Floyd and Floyd's problems in life, but...it seemed like before, he'd always had this suspicious feeling toward Floyd. They said nobody was the boss at A.A., but it had always seemed to him like Floyd really was trying to be the boss. Now Sean could tell that Floyd was his friend. In fact, everybody at the meeting was Sean's friend. When Floyd was done with his speech, Sean jumped up and hugged him. Floyd seemed kind of surprised by that, but everybody clapped and cheered. When Sean hugged him, with his face pressed into his corduroy lapels, he could smell his own breath, and the funny thing was it smelled like butterscotch.

Back home at Mr. Wang's house, he thought about what to do next. It seemed like things were getting more copacetic now, and the last thing he needed was more of this weird stuff with the thing in the pool. He would just have to keep away from the pool area. Maybe if you only let yourself get tentacled once it could be okay, and you could still be normal. Anything could happen once. Mike had told him about getting drunk one time and messing around with Kenny Costa, but that was just one time, so that didn't make Mike and Kenny fags or anything. It was only if you kept on doing it that it really meant something was wrong with you.

Sean noticed he was really hungry, so he fried himself some eggs. He was so hungry that he ate them all runny, straight out of the pan, and cooked some more next to them while he was eating the first ones. He started thinking about his daughter. How old was Lisa now? Fourteen? Fifteen? Jesus, she was definitely fifteen, and that meant she was the same age Sean and Cindy had been when Lisa was born. On impulse, he dialed their number.

"Hello?" It was Paul's voice.

"Hi, Paul, it's Sean Reilly. Hey, I really called to say hi to Lisa, but I just want to say it's no biggie about arresting me and everything. I don't hold it against you."

"Okay, Sean. I'll put Lisa on." It seemed like a really long time until Lisa came on

the line.

"Sean?" She didn't call him Daddy anymore.

"Hi Lisa."

"Why'd you call?"

"Uh, just to say hi."

"Okay, hi."

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah. Thanks for asking."

"Doing okay in school?"

"Better than you did, I guess."

"Yeah. All right, say hi to Cindy for me."

"Okay." *Click.*

Lisa was a great kid.

The next morning, Sean woke up with a killer headache. Maybe he was coming down with the flu. He sat around the house all day and watched reruns on TV. Floyd called during "I Dream of Jeannie," but Sean didn't want to talk to him too much. He figured he'd acted stupid hugging him and everything. He promised he'd be there for that night's meeting, and said he had to go. The more he thought about things, the more twisted it all seemed. The kitchen was on the side of the house by the pool, and even with the windows closed, the butterscotch smell was getting into the house. He thought about trying to do something about the thing in the deep end, but he didn't know what to do, and he didn't know what he'd be *able* to do, if he went out there. Floyd ended up calling again and giving him a ride to A.A.

At the meeting, everybody was saying all the usual stuff...*changing playgrounds and playmates...* Floyd read a poem that didn't rhyme. Sean was thinking about the butterscotch smell. *I'm a winner today, no matter what happens, as long as I don't pick up that first drink.* The butterscotch smell was one of those things that you didn't notice until it was gone. He sniffed at the sleeve of his flannel shirt, and thought he got a whiff of it. He took a real deep breath through his sleeve, pretending he needed to sneeze. It didn't really work that well. Damn, if he could just get some of that stuff right now.

Floyd drove Sean home after the meeting. Blah blah blah. Sean tuned him out. When they got to the house, he thanked him and ran down the long driveway, smelling the butterscotch. It was good – really good. He went around to the back of the house, and the smell washed over him in the dark like a big breaking wave. It almost made him gag, but he knew it was what he needed. He stumbled, fell down on his knees, and leaned out over the pool with his arms in the water up to the elbows. This time he knew what was going to happen, but now that he was expecting it he was surprised how long it took. It seemed like he was kneeling there for five or ten minutes, just praying for it to happen – *please, oh please, God.* Finally he felt the tendril touch his fingers, and then creep up his arm. The tip moved around his face, almost like it was asking for permission, and then the whole tentacle slid into his mouth and down his throat.

After that day, some other unusual things started happening. The first one was

that he got talking to Paul Hollis, and it turned out Paul really wasn't such a bad guy. Next thing Sean knew, he had a job washing dishes at Summit Sandwiches. Paul had talked to the owner.

Another strange thing was that the people at A.A. started treating him different. Barb Gerdes called him one night when she was feeling tempted to drink. She said he was a good listener. At meetings, he would say something to someone like, "Everything's gonna be okay." And the person would act like it was a big deal, like nobody had ever said that to them before. Maybe it impressed them because he really meant it.

First thing every morning he would get himself butterscotched up, and then for the rest of the day that was what it felt like: everything's gonna be okay. Sean had never really liked people before. He'd never trusted them. Now it was like he could open himself up to them. It was almost like all the people in the world had invisible tentacles, but normally they were afraid to touch each other with them. He talked Bruce Wien out of a suicide attempt, and afterward Bruce kept talking about how much it had meant to him that Sean stayed calm. Well, it was easy to stay calm when you were butterscotched.

The only problem was that sometimes if he didn't get butterscotched for a long time, he'd start feeling really bad, like that first time when he'd thought he had the flu. But it wasn't like he was really addicted to it or anything. He could always deal with it fine as long as he made sure to get dosed right before he left for work in the morning. That would always last him until the end of his shift, no problem. One time Sue, the day-shift waitress, asked him if he wanted to go shoot some pool or something after work.

He probably could have, but he didn't want to risk stretching it that long, so he said no.

He started losing weight. He'd been carrying a spare tire around for the last ten or twelve years, ever since the divorce. Of course he knew why the weight was suddenly disappearing. He wasn't stupid. The thing in the pool needed Sean to bring its food to it. It couldn't digest food on its own. It was like a flea or a mosquito – or a baby. One night he looked out the window from the kitchen and saw a possum lying there on the deck with the tentacle down its throat. Its scaly tail wagged back and forth slowly, real lazy like. Sean was surprised it could even move its tail. He watched the whole thing, and when it was all over, the possum waddled away into the redwood trees, and he could tell that it was a real happy possum.

The thing in the pool wasn't *bad*. The relationship was more what happened with those little birds that went inside the crocodile's mouth and cleaned its teeth. The thing got food from Sean, but Sean got something back from it, too. It was an even trade. It had done a lot for him, helped him relax and be more comfortable around people. He had hit bottom before the thing came along, with that string of DUIs. And turning things around afterward, that was really happening because the butterscotch was helping him deal with people, and people were responding to him.

He kept on calling Lisa every now and then, and after a while she stopped being so suspicious. One day she came into the restaurant after school, upset. There wasn't much business, so Sean took a break and sat in one of the booths with her.

"What's the matter, Lisa?"

"Paul's an asshole," she said, not making eye contact. She had her brown school folder on the table, and on the cover was a big drawing of a bloodshot eyeball that she'd done with a marking pen.

"He's not an asshole, Lisa. He's done a good job of taking care of you. He cares about you."

"He thinks I'm a slut."

"He really said that?"

"No, but that's what he means."

"What happened?"

"Barry and me...we were in Barry's truck, out on Old Ranch Road. Paul came by in his black-and-white and started shining a flashlight on us." She was crying.

"Oh." Sean took her hand. "Everything's gonna be okay, Lisa."

"He says it's because of not going to church that I'm heading down the wrong path."

"You're not heading down the wrong path, honey. Everything's gonna be okay. Just take it one day at a time."

She sniffled and smiled at him. "You really think so?"

"Yeah."

"What about you?" she asked. "What do you think about God?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, you."

Sean had never really thought about it much. He considered telling her what they said at A.A.: *Sometimes you have to take strength from a power greater than yourself.* He realized now that it was true, really true, but he couldn't exactly put it that way to her, because it would sound fake.

"You know, some people go to church," he said, "but I'll tell you what I do. I just go and sit by the pool, and sometimes I – I feel something powerful inside me."

"Really? Like a spirit or something?"

"I dunno. Maybe."

She dabbed at her face with a paper napkin, smearing her blue eyeshadow. "I'm glad you told me that. You're really cool, Daddy."

He squeezed her hand. "I think you're cool, too, honey."

"Cause, you know," she continued, "I always felt the same way you do. Like, Paul thinks if I want to get in touch with God I have to sit in a certain chair in a certain church. Well, who's to say you can't find your own personal God just sitting by the pool, right?"

"Uh...well, I wouldn't really call it God." Sean thought uncomfortably about the first time he'd intentionally let the thing tentacle him.

"Yeah, the name doesn't mean anything, right? I think everybody really worships the same God, just with different names. Don't you think so?"

"Er...I don't know."

"See, that's what's great about you, Daddy. If you don't know, you just say so. They're all so certain they know the answers. I mean, it's not like they've ever really physically touched God, right?"

"Well...."

"I think people go to church because they just can't handle their own problems. Like, they think God or Jesus or somebody is gonna come down from the sky, and all of a sudden their life's gonna get better, right? I mean, get real. It's gotta come from yourself. I really respect the way you're making it on your own. It must be tough. Are you eating okay, though? You seem awful skinny."

"I needed to lose some weight anyway." It was true that he'd been feeling kind of weak and dizzy, but he'd been figuring it was nothing he couldn't handle. He'd noticed he was starting to lose some hair these days, and he didn't really like the image of himself as a fat old bald guy. Being a skinny old bald guy had a lot more class.

"It's sweet of you to be concerned about me, though," he said. "Well, I better get back to work before the dishes pile up too much."

Sean spent the rest of his shift thinking about what Lisa had said. The more he thought about it, the crummier he felt. He didn't feel so bad about being fake to everybody at A.A., but Lisa really seemed to believe in him. He'd only just got her to accept him, but what would she think if she knew about what he was really doing? She'd probably start drawing cartoons of a drugged-out Sean on her school folder, complete with those big bloodshot eyes. He remembered the cover of one of those underground comics she bought in San Francisco, a picture of a giant black beetle humping on a naked blond chick. If Lisa knew what was happening with Sean and the thing in the pool, that's exactly how she'd see it, like the world's nastiest gross-out joke.

He decided he needed to quit, but he didn't know how. The A.A. stuff should have helped, but it didn't. You were supposed to clean the booze out of your house. Well, how was he going to clean the thing out of the pool? Avoid the people and places that you associate with drinking? Sean couldn't do that. Finally he decided to take a bus trip. He waited until he had his days off, and bought a Greyhound ticket to Oakland. He didn't have enough money for a motel. He hung around the bus station, feeling more and more sick, until the manager started looking at him funny and they made him leave. He ended up sitting on a sidewalk, throwing up. The cops picked him up, found the return bus ticket for the next night, and put him on the bus home that same night instead. By the time he got back to the side of the pool, he felt like the tentacle could wrap around his neck and choke him to death and he wouldn't care, as long as his last breath had the butterscotch in it.

The next morning, while he was brushing his teeth, he remembered that thought, and it scared him. But what was he going to do about it? It was like he was in the grip of something that was more powerful than him. When he finished brushing his teeth, he noticed some blood on the toothbrush.

What could he have done different? Explain it to those cops in Oakland and ask for help? "Uh, excuse me, officers, but please don't put me on the bus back home tonight, because there's a squid from Mars in my pool, and I'm trying to kick my addiction to having it put its tentacle down my throat." That was the horrible thing: he was all alone with this problem, and there was nobody who could help him.

Lisa showed up at the restaurant again that day, looking more cheerful. Barry dropped her off. He seemed like a nice enough kid. He worked painting houses, and when he drove off, Sean saw that the back of the truck was full of his work stuff.

"Hi Lisa."

"Hey, Daddy." Her T-shirt had a cartoon of President Reagan with vampire fangs. "So, are you gonna tell me about your new girlfriend?"

"What?"

"Really, Daddy, it's okay. It's not like I'm gonna freak out just 'cause you get in a relationship. The divorce was a long time ago, and I barely even remember it. Is it Sue?"

"Honey, I don't have a girlfriend."

Lisa looked hurt. "Me and Barry came by the house to say hi. We smelled baking. You're not gonna try to convince me you learned to bake cookies, are you? You're not exactly a real modern 80's guy, you know."

"You came to the house? When?"

"Wednesday." That was the day he'd been in Oakland. "We brought some food over, but then when we smelled her baking cookies, we figured we shouldn't barge in on you guys, so we left. Thought we'd give you a chance to tell us officially first. Man, she was baking up a storm. What was it, butterscotch brownies? She must have made enough for a whole bake sale. We could smell it all the way down at the end of the driveway. Gonna put some meat back on your bones, huh?"

Sean felt like all the blood had drained out of his body. "Lisa, I want you to promise me something. I want you to promise you'll never go to Wang's house." He felt short of breath, and his mouth wasn't working right. "Please, I'm – I'm begging you, please Lisa. Stay away from there, honey, oh God, it's not good for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can't explain it, but it's dangerous." He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "Please!"

Lisa just looked at him for a long time, and then she said okay in a small voice, and left. He saw Sue staring at him.

Of course Sean hadn't been using his head. He could see that now. Wang's house was on a big piece of property, and it was all fenced around the outside, plus there was another fence around the pool area. So Sean had figured there was no way anybody else would get near the pool, and it wouldn't be a problem for anybody else, just him. Well, duh; obviously anybody who'd ever seen a monster movie should know that the thing wouldn't just stay in the pool forever. It was probably trying to take over the world. It would, like, climb out, and start eating everybody, and then it would lay its eggs, and there would be baby ones running around. So now what was he going to do about it? Before, he'd thought things were bad because he had a problem, and nobody else could help him with it. But now it was even worse. Not only was he dealing with it alone, but it was going to hurt other people too – hurt *Lisa*.

The next day when he went out to the pool, he found a dead possum lying on the steps at the shallow end. Before he even got a closer look at it, he knew in his gut that it was same possum he'd seen before. With the smell of the butterscotch blowing over him, he stepped out of his flip-flops and into the water, picked it up by the tail, and looked it over while it hung upside-down. There were lots of big bald patches on its fur. He laid it on the deck and pulled back its lips. It was missing most of its teeth, and the way its gums had pulled back and shriveled up reminded him of what he'd been seeing

recently in the mirror. He remembered thinking before about the happy possum.

He called in sick to work, took the bus down to the pool store in Scott's Valley, and rented the kind of electric pump that you use when you want to empty out a pool. They gave him one of those long, fat flexible plastic hoses to attach to it. He figured he'd toss the pump in the spa that was built into the side of the pool, and start pumping the water out. Normally if you wanted to empty the pool you'd throw the pump into the bottom of the deep end, but if he did that, the thing would probably just toss it back out, like it had with the chlorine floats. But the pool had pipes that would drain its water into the spa when the spa was empty, and eventually if he kept on pumping from the spa, the water level in the rest of the pool would go down to the same level as the bottom of the spa. Then maybe at least part of the thing would stick out of the water. Maybe then if he got a gun, he could get a shot at it. Or maybe it just wouldn't be able to stay alive in such a small amount of water.

By the time he got back to town with the pump, it was late at night, and he was feeling like he had the flu, a hangover, and food poisoning all at once, plus maybe the dentist had shoved the drill too far into his head by mistake. He had to walk home from the bus station, carrying the heavy pump and hose. He wasn't strong these days, and his arms felt like sacks of cement. He threw up twice along the road, and after that he told himself he felt better because his stomach was empty. He knew he probably wasn't walking straight. There was just a little sliver of moon, and all he could really see was the white line that ran along the side of the road. He told himself he had to keep following the line, no matter what. He got to where Wang's driveway met the road, and then he could smell the butterscotch, just a little. He wanted to pinch his nose, but he didn't have a hand free, so he turned his head to the side and tried to press his nostrils hard against the hose that he had coiled over his shoulder. He walked up the driveway, trying to go as fast as he could so he wouldn't lose his nerve, but the smell was still getting in through his mouth. He dropped the pump and the hose, and then he was through the gate and kneeling by the pool, taking big, fast breaths.

He knew he'd failed, but it didn't really sink in until the next day at work, later in the afternoon, when the happy-happy effect was starting to wear off. The pump would still be lying in the driveway when he got home. He thought about whether he'd have enough will power to wade through the cloud of butterscotch and throw the pump in the spa. He imagined himself talking about it with Mr. Spock from Star Trek.

Spock, it looks like we're in a pretty tight situation here.

Yes, Captain Sean.

What do you think the chances are that I'll be able to do the job with the pump?

Captain, considering that you've fucked up just about everything else in your whole life so far, I would say that the chances are approximately one in 397 billion.

Sure, he could try and psych himself up to give it his best shot, and that might have been acceptable if it was just him. But it wasn't just him. He couldn't even count on himself to be on the same side as the human race anymore. He was like one of the people in Invasion of the Body Snatchers whose brains had been taken over by the aliens. He could imagine just what would happen. They'd told him at the pool store that it would probably take the pump more than a day to empty a whole pool. He'd start it

going, but while it was pumping, he'd go on getting butterscotched. And then, when the water level was getting real low, and the thing in the pool was getting upset, he could imagine exactly what he'd do next: he'd unplug the pump, throw the garden hose in the pool, and say to himself, *I'll just put a little water back in to calm it down so I can get one last hit.*

"Hey Sue," he yelled through the little window they passed the dishes and orders through, "will you give me a pen, and a few sheets out of your pad?"

He sat down in the corner of the kitchen and started writing a letter to Lisa on the backs of the order slips. He didn't know how much sense it would make, probably about as much as you could expect from a freaked-out druggie who'd dropped out of high school. It didn't fit on the sheets Sue had given him, so he asked her for more, and ended up using almost the whole pad. He folded the whole thing in half and stuck it in the back of the cubbyhole where he put his stuff while he was working. He knew they'd find it there.

"Are you okay, Sean?" asked Sue. The way she was looking at him reminded him of the clerks at the bus station in Oakland.

"Yeah, sure. I just had to write something down."

The next day was sunny and warm. The phone rang while he was eating his cereal, but he didn't pick it up. When he'd finished eating, he ran the pump's big hose from the pool area to the drain in the front of the house, hooked the pump up to it, threw the pump in the spa, and plugged it in. It blew out a few bubbles, and then the hose quivered, and from around the house he heard the sound of the water splashing into the drain.

His surfboard had collected a lot of spider webs in the garage. He brushed them off, put the board in the pool, climbed on, and lay down on his back, still wearing all his clothes. He'd never been this close to the surface before, right out in the middle of the milky water. The butterscotch hit his brain like a wrecking ball. He knew he didn't have much time before he wouldn't be able to do anything. He inch-wormed himself carefully along the rough surface of the board until his hair was in the cool water, and then his back and arms, and all of his face except for his nose and mouth. He could tell that he was almost at the point of sliding off the board. Without his body's natural buoyancy, he'd already have slipped in. The sunlight was streaming through the redwood trees, and Sean felt happy. Mr. Spock had been wrong. For once in Sean's life, he knew that he'd done something important, and done it right.

He waited for the tentacle to come. A distant worry nibbled at him - it was hard to make your brain worry when the butterscotch was coming over you - but a tiny part of him wondered whether he was far out enough on the board. He tried to inch himself a little farther out, but his muscles had already stopped working. Then he felt some water trickle into one of his nostrils, and he knew it was going to work. He heard a car come up the driveway, but his brain had a hard time figuring out what that could mean.

"Daddy!"

It was Lisa's voice. What was she doing here? He felt something touch him under his shoulders. It was the aluminum pole of the pool net. He felt himself moving through the water, and then she was hauling him out onto the deck. He saw her face now, but it

was covered with a respirator, the kind Barry used sometimes when he was painting.

"It's okay, Daddy, I've got you." She dragged him out through the gate. She was crying. "You should have told me. You didn't have to handle it all by yourself. Don't worry, okay? I've got you. Everything's gonna be okay."

She said it like she meant it.