Timmy was late.

The sun was low on the horizon, and he knew what that meant. Mom was going to be furious if he got home after dark.

His front tire caught on a pine cone as he made the sharp turn at Bluff Drive. He almost slipped.

Almost.

But Timmy had great balance. That's what Coach Fox always said in P.E.: "You've got some *wheels*, young man." Which was Coach Fox lingo for having great balance. All the kids knew that.

Timmy lurched to the left, instinctively countering the shift in weight as the bike tried to skid out from beneath him, and the wheels of his Raleigh Record snapped back in line like he knew they would.

Timmy chugged past the marina parking lot, knees churning. He did not even glance at the scores of bobbing Grady-Whites and Sea Pros tied up at the Isle of Hope Marina.

It was just then that the seagull flew right smack into him.

He'd biked this route a hundred times before—no, maybe a thousand—and he'd never ever hit one, despite their omnipresent state by the edge of the river, despite their squawking, scrabbling, boorish *flappiness*, for lack of a better term.

Still, today was different.

Today, he was trying to beat the setting sun, thinking about his mom and the butt-whipping he'd get *fo' sho'* and then the bird hit him.

The gull came zooming in from the bluff side like a feathered cruise missile. It clocked Timmy squarely in the temple, knocking him from his bike. He had no time to think, no time even to react, when the bird committed its kamikaze flight into his skull: one minute he was furiously peddling his bike on Bluff Drive and the next he was lying, bruised and bleeding, at the oyster-strewn base of the Isle of Hope Bluff.

Timmy's bike had taken a decent tumble, too. The handlebars were bent sideways, and the Shimano gear changer that Timmy had cut grass all summer to pay for had somehow been torn free of its moorings and lay in pieces on the embankment.

"Aw, *crap*!" Timmy said, although he was thinking of a different word that he dared not say. Mom always said that God was watching even if you didn't see or hear him. That always made Timmy a little uncomfortable, as though the world was just a big one-way mirror with the Almighty on the other side.

The poor bird lay crumpled on the ground beside him, glassyeyed. Timmy marveled that anything so light could have ever done all of this damage.

He was picking up the battered remains of his gear changer when he saw the bag.

It was a Hefty lawn bag, partially buried in the dry, dark earth of the bluff. He knew the brand, recognizing the texture of it from bagging grass the summer before. Something had pulled at it a bit, leaving parts of it exposed. An animal, perhaps—a dog or a raccoon.

Perhaps.

Or maybe I knocked it open falling down the bluff, he thought.

Timmy was still worried about being late. But the stink he smelled made him forget that. That stink was like nothing he had ever smelled in his life. It was the inimitable stench of dead flesh, a scent his nostrils knew meant *get away* from before the time he was born.

And then Timmy saw the hand.

It was shriveled, like a monkey's paw.

The finger pads were wrinkled and collapsed, and each fingernail was tipped with flaking red nail polish. The hand was severed at the wrist; the bones jutted out like two dirty sticks. There was a ring on the fourth finger set with a yellow-colored emerald-cut stone. It glimmered broadly, splaying rays of jaundiced light from the dying sun.

Timmy stared.

Timmy blinked.

Maggots erupted from the hole in the ground—a bumper crop of writhing pestilence that bubbled up from the Underworld. A scream was building in Timmy's throat even before he saw the swarm of flies that followed, a cloud of them boiling out of the sightless skull.

Hours passed. The shorebirds roosted and the stars came out and still Timmy screamed. He screamed until his voice gave out, until all his shredded vocal cords could produce was a hoarse whisper. That's the way his mama found him, hours later—shivering cross-legged in the dark, eyes wide and unseeing, his little brown hands clenched into fists so tightly that the nails had drawn blood. He had cried until all of his tears were gone, until the terror left him and spilled out all over the ground, until his panicked mother found him there covered with flies as he sat next to a dead woman's corpse.

"Oh, baby! Sweet Jesus, Timmy, what has happened to you?"

Mama held her little boy in her arms and rocked him for an hour before she called the police. There would be no butt-whipping. Not that night, nor ever again.

On many a dark night thereafter, while he lay in bed waiting for sleep to come, Timmy would see the open-mouthed skull grinning at him from a stinking hole in the ground of the Bluff at Isle of Hope.

The screams echoed deep inside his brain long after Timmy's voice went silent.