



The Jar, Ray Bradbury

The Jar

IT was one of those things they keep in a jar in the tent of a sideshow on the outskirts of a little, drowsy town. One of those pale things drifting in alcohol plasma, forever dreaming and circling, with its peeled dead eyes staring out at you and never seeing you. It went with the noiselessness of late night, and only the crickets chirping, the frogs sobbing off in the moist swampland. One of those things in a big jar that makes your stomach jump like it does when you see an amputated arm in a laboratory vat.

Charlie stared back at it for a long time.

A long time, his big raw hands, hairy on the roofs of them, clenching the rope that kept back curious people. He had paid his dime and now he stared.

It was getting late. The merry-go-round drowsed down to a lazy mechanical tinkle. Tentpeppers back of a canvas smoked and cursed over a poker game. Lights switched out, putting a summer gloom over the carnival. People streamed homeward in cliques and queues. Somewhere, a radio flared up, then cut, leaving Louisiana sky wide and silent with stars peppering it.

There was nothing in the world for Charlie but that pale thing sealed in its universe of serum. Charlie's loose mouth hung open in a pink weal, teeth showing, eyes puzzled, admiring, wondering.

Someone walked in the shadows behind him, small beside Charlie's giant tallness. 'Oh,' said the shadow, coming into the light-bulb glare. 'You still here, bud?'

'Yeah,' said Charlie, irritated his thoughts were touched.

The carny-boss appreciated Charlie's curiosity. He nodded at his old acquaintance in the jar. 'Everybody likes it; in a peculiar kinda way, I mean.'

Charlie rubbed his long jaw-bone. 'You — uh — ever consider selling it?'

The carny-boss's eyes dilated, then closed. He snorted. 'Naw. It brings customers. They like seeing stuff like that. Sure.'

Charlie made a disappointed, 'Oh.'

'Well,' considered the carny-boss, 'if a guy had money, maybe — '

'How much money?'

'If a guy had — ' the carny-boss estimated, squinting eyes, counting on fingers, watching Charlie as he tacked it out one finger after another. 'If a guy had three, four, say, maybe seven or eight — '

Charlie nodded with each motion, expectantly. Seeing this, the carny-boss raised his total, ' — maybe ten dollars, or maybe fifteen — '

Charlie scowled, worried. The carny-boss retreated. 'Say a guy has twelve dollars — ' Charlie grinned. 'Why he could buy that thing in that jar,' concluded the carny-boss.

'Funny thing,' said Charlie, 'I got just twelve bucks in my denims. And I been reckoning how looked up to I'd be back down at Wilder's Hollow if I brung home something like this to set on my shelf over the table. The guys would sure look up to me then, I bet.'

'Well, now, listen here — ' said the carny-boss.

The sale was completed with the jar put on the back seat of Charlie's wagon. The horse skittered his hoofs when he saw the jar, and whinnied.

The carny-boss glanced up with an expression of, almost, relief. 'I was tired of seeing the damn thing around, anyway. Don't thank me. Lately I been thinking things about it, funny things — but, don't mind me, I'm a big-mouthed so-and-so. S'long, farmer!'

Charlie drove off. The naked blue light bulbs withdrew like dying stars, the open dark country night of Louisiana swept in around wagon and horse. The brass merry-go-round clanking faded. There was just Charlie, the horse, timing his grey hoofs, and the crickets.

And the jar behind the high seat.

It sloshed back and forth, back and forth. Sloshed wet. And the cold grey thing drowsily slumped against the glass, looking out, looking out, but seeing nothing, nothing, nothing.

Charlie leaned back to pet the lid. Smelling of strange liquor his hand returned, changed and cold and trembling, excited. He was bright scarlet happy about this. Yes, sir!

Slosh, slosh, slosh. . .

In the Hollow numerous grass-green and blood-red lanterns tossed dusty light over men huddled, chanting, spitting, sitting on General Store property.

They knew the creak-bumble of Charlie's vehicle and did not shift their raw, drab-haired skulls as he rocked to a halt. Their cigars were nicotine glow-worms, their voices were frog mutterings in summer nights.

Charlie leaned down at an eager angle. 'Hi, Clem! Hi, Milt!' 'Lo, Charlie. Lo, Charlie,' they murmured. The political conflict continued. Charlie cut it down the seam:

'I got somethin' here. I got somethin' you might wanna see!'

Tom Carmody's eyes glinted, green in the lamp-light, from the General Store porch. It seemed to Charlie that Tom Carmody was forever installed under porches in shadow, or under trees in shadow, or if in a room then in the farthest niche shining his eyes out at you from his dark. You never knew what his face was doing, and his eyes were always funning you. And every time they looked at you they laughed a different way:

'You ain't got nothin' we wants ta see, you dumb sheebaw!'

Charlie made a fist with a blunt knuckle fringe. 'Somethin' in a jar,' he went on. 'Looks kine a like a brain, kine a like a pickled wolf, kine a like — well, come look yourself!'

Somebody snicked their cigar into a fall of pink ash and ambled over to look. Charlie grandly elevated the jar lid, and in the uncertain lantern light the man's face changed. 'Hey, now, what in hell is this — ?'

It was the first thaw of the night. Others shifted lazily upright, leaned forward; gravity pulled them into walking. They made no effort, except to keep one shoe afore the other to keep from collapsing upon their unusual faces. They circled the jar and contents. And Charlie, first time in his life, seized upon some strategy and clapped the lid down with a glass clatter:

'You want to see more, drop aroun' my house! It'll be there,' he declared, generously.

Tom Carmody spat from out his porch eyrie, 'Ha!'

'Lemme see that again!' cried Gramps Medknowe. 'Is it a brain?'

Charlie flapped the reins and the horse stumbled into action.

'Come on aroun'! You're welcome!'

'What'll your wife say?'

'She'll kick the tar off'n our heels!'

But Charlie and wagon were gone over the hill. They stood around, all of them, chewing tongues, squinting after. Tom Carmody swore softly from the porch. . .

As Charlie climbed the steps of his shack, carrying the jar to its throne in the living-room, he thought that from now on the place would be a palace. The incumbent king swam without moving in his private pool, raised, elevated upon his shelf over the skinny table.

This jar was the one thing that dispelled the grey sameness that hung over the place on the swamp-rim.

'What've you got there?'

Thedy's thin soprano turned him from his admiration. She stood in the bedroom door glaring out, her thin body clothed in faded blue gingham, her hair drawn to a drab knot behind red ears. Her eyes were faded like the gingham. 'Well,' she repeated. 'What is it?'

'What's it look like to you, Thedy?'

She took a thin step forward, making a slow indolent pendulum of hips. Her eyes were intent upon the jar, her lips drawing back to show feline milk teeth.

The dead pale thing hung in its serum.

Thedy snapped a dull-blue glance at Charlie, then back to the jar, once more at Charlie, once more to the jar, then she whirled quickly to clutch the wall.

'It — it looks. It — looks just like — you — Charlie!' she shouted hoarsely.

The bedroom door slammed behind her.

The reverberation did not disturb the jar's contents. But Charlie stood there, longing after her, neck muscles long, taut, heart pounding frantically, and then after his heart slowed a bit, he talked to the thing in the jar:

'I work the bottom land to the buttbone ever' year, and she takes the money and rushes off down home visitin' her folks nine weeks at a stretch. I can't keep holt of her. She and the men from the store they make fun of me. I can't help it if I don't know the ways to hold or touch or work her. Damn, but I try!'

Philosophically, the contents of the jar gave no advice.

'Charlie?'

Someone stood in the front-yard door.

Charlie turned, startled, then broke out a grin.

It was some of the men from the General Store.

'Uh — Charlie — we — that is — we thought — well — we came up to have a look at that — stuff — you got in that there jar — '

July passed warm and it was August.

For the first time in years, Charlie was happy as tall corn growing after a drought. It was gratifying of an evening to hear boots shushing through the tall grass, the sound of men spitting into the ditch prior to setting foot on the porch, the sound of heavy bodies creaking across it, and the groan of the house as yet another shoulder leaned against its frame door and another voice said, as a hairy wrist wiped clean the questioning mouth:

'Kin I come in?'

With elaborate casualness, Charlie'd invite the arrivals in. There'd be chairs, soap-boxes for all, or at least carpets to squat on. And by the time crickets were itching their legs into a summertime humming and frogs were throat-swollen like ladies with goitres shouting in the great night, the room would be full to bursting with people from all the bottom lands.

At first nobody would say nothing. The first half-hour of such an evening, while people came in and got settled, was spent in carefully rolling cigarettes. Putting tobacco neatly into the rut of brown paper, loading it, tamping it, as they loaded and tamped and rolled their thoughts and fears and amazement for the evening. It gave them time to think. You could see their brains working behind their eyes as they fingered the cigarettes into smoking order.

It was kind of a rude church gathering. They sat, squatted, leaned on plaster walls, and one by one, with reverent awe, they stared at the jar upon its shelf.

They wouldn't stare sudden like. That would've been irreverent. No, they kind of did it slow, casual, as if they were glancing around the room — letting eyes fumble over just any old object that happened into their consciousness.

And — just by accident, of course — the focus of their wandering eyes would occur always at the same place. After a while all eyes in the room would be fastened to it, like pins stuck in some incredible pin-cushion. And the only sound would be someone sucking a corn-cob. Or the children's barefooted scurry on the porch planks outside. Maybe some woman's voice would come, 'You kids git away, now! Git!' And with a giggle like soft, quick water, the bare feet would rush off to scare the bull-frogs.

Charlie would be up front, naturally, on his rocking chair, a plaid pillow under his lean rump, rocking slow, enjoying the fame and looked-up-toness that came with keeping the jar.

Thedy, she'd be seen way back of the room with the womenfolk in a bunch like grey grapes, abiding their menfolk.

Thedy looked like she was ripe for jealous screaming. But she said nothing, just watched men tromp into her living-room and sit at the feet of Charlie staring at this here Holy Grail-like thing, and her lips were set as seven-day concrete and she spoke not a civil word to nobody.

After a period of proper silence, someone, maybe old Gramps Medknowe from Crick Road, would clear the phlegm from his old throat's cavern, lean forward, blinking, wet his lips, maybe, and there'd be a curious tremble in his calloused fingers.

This would cue everyone to get ready for the talking to come. Ears were primed. People settled much as sows in warm mud after the rain. Gramps looked a long while, measured his lips with a lizard tongue, then settled back and said, like always, in a high thin old man's tenor: 'Wonder what it is? Wonder if it's a he or a she or just a plain old it? Sometimes I wake up nights, twist on my corn-matting, think about that jar settin' here in the long dark. Think about it hangin' in liquid, peaceful and pale like an animal oyster. Sometimes I wake Maw and we both think of it. . .'

While talking, Gramps moved his fingers in a quavering pantomime. Everybody watched his thick thumb weave, and the other heavy-nailed fingers undulate.

'. . . we both lay there, thinkin'. And we shivers. Maybe a hot night, trees sweatin', mosquitoes too hot to fly, but we shivers jest the same, and turn over, tryin' to sleep. . .'

Gramps lapsed back into silence, as if his speech was enough from him, let some other voice talk the wonder, awe and strangeness.

Juke Marmer, from Willow Sump, wiped sweat off his palms on the round of his knees and softly said:

'I remember when I was a runnel-nosed kid. We had a cat who was all the time makin' kittens. Lordamighty, she'd a litter ever time she turned around and skipped a fence — ' Juke spoke in a kind of holy softness, benevolent. 'Well, we usually gave the kittens away, but when this one particular litter busted out, everybody within walkin' distance had one-two our cats by gift, already.

' — So Ma busied on the back porch with a big two-gallon glass jar, fillin' it to the top with water. It slopped in the sunlight. Ma said, 'Juke, you drown them kittens!' I 'member I stood there, the kittens mewed, runnin' 'round, blind, small, helpless and snugly. Just beginnin' to get their eyes open. I looked at Ma, I said, 'Not me, Ma! You do it!' But Ma turned pale and said it had to be done and I was the only one handy. And she went off to stir gravy and fix chicken. I — I picked up one — kitten. I held it. It was warm. It made a mewin' sound. I felt like runnin' away, not ever comin' back.'

Juke nodded his head now, eyes bright, young, seeing into the past making it stark, chiselling it out with hammer and knife of words, smoothing it with his tongue:

'I dropped the kitten in the water.

'The kitten closed his eyes, opened his mouth, tryin' for air. I 'member how the little white fangs showed, the pink tongue came out, and bubbles with it, in a line to the top of the water!

'I know to this day the way that kitten floated after it was all over, driftin' aroun', aroun', slow and not worryin', lookin' out at me, not condemnin' me for what I done. But not likin' me, neither. Ahhh. . .'

Hearts beat fast. Eyes shifted quickly from Juke to the shelved jar, back to him, up again; a spectators' game, like one sees at a tennis tournament, interest changing from moment to moment, apprehensively.

A pause.

Jahdoo, the black man from Heron Swamp, tossed his ivory eyeballs like a dusky juggler in his head. His dark knuckles knotted and flexed — grasshoppers alive.

'You know what thet is? You know, you know? I tells you. That am the centre of Life, sure 'nuff! Lord believe me, it am so!'

Swaying in a tree-like rhythm, Jahdoo was blown by some swamp wind nobody could see, hear or feel, save himself. His eyeballs went around again, as if loosened from all mooring. His voice needled a dark thread pattern picking up each person by the lobes of their ears and sewing them into one unbreathing design:

'From that, lyin' back in the Middibamboo Sump, all sort o' thing crawl. It put out hand, it put out feet, it put out tongue an' horn an' it grow. Little bitty amoeba, perhap. Then a frog with a bulge-throat fit ta bust! Yah!' He cracked knuckles. 'It slobber on up to its gummy joints and it — it AM A MAN! That am the centre of creation! That am Middibamboo Mama, from which we all come ten thousand year ago. Believe it!'

'Ten thousand year ago!' reiterated Granny Carnation.

'It am old! Looky it! It donn worra no more. It know betta. It hang like pork chop in fryin' fat. It got eye to see with, but it donn blink 'em, they donn look fretted, does they? No, man! It know betta. It know thet we done come from it, and we is goin' back to it!'

'What colour eyes has it got?'

'Grey.'

'Naw, green!'

'What colour hair? Brown?'

'Black!'

'Red!'

'No, grey!'

Then, Charlie would give his drawling opinion. Some nights he'd say the same thing, some nights not. It didn't matter. When you said the same thing night after night in the deep summer, it always sounded different.

The crickets changed it. The frogs changed it. The thing in the jar changed it. Charlie said:

'What if an old man went back into the swamp, or maybe a young kid, and wandered aroun' for years and years lost in the drippin' trails and gullies, the wet ravines in the nights, skin a turnin' pale, and makin' cold and shrivellin' up. Bein' away from the sun he'd keep witherin' away up and up and finally sink into a muck-hole and lay in a kind of — solution — like the maggot 'skeeters sleepin' in liquid. Why, why — for all we know, this might be someone we know. Someone we passed words with once on a time. For all we know. . .'

A hissing from among the womenfolk back in the shadow. One woman standing, eyes shining black, fumbling for words. Her name was Mrs. Tridden. She said:

'Lots of little kids run stark naked into the swamp ever' year. They runs around and they never comes back. I almost got lost maself. I — I lost my little boy, Foley, that way. You — you DON'T SUPPOSE!!'

Breaths were taken in, snatched through nostrils, constricted, tightened. Mouths turned down at corners, bent by grim facial muscles. Heads turned on celery-stalk necks, and eyes read her horror and hope. It was in Mrs. Tridden's body, wire-taut, holding on to the wall back of her with straight fingers stiff.

'My baby,' she whispered. She breathed it out. 'My baby. My Foley. Foley! Foley, is that you? Foley! Foley, tell me, baby, is that YOU!' Everybody held their breath, turning to see the jar.

The thing in the jar said nothing. It just stared blind-white out upon the multitude. And deep in raw-boned bodies a secret fear juice ran like spring thaw, and the resolute ice of calm life and belief and easy humbleness was cracked down the middle by that juice and melted away in a gigantic torrent! Someone screamed.

'It moved!'

'No, no, it didn' move. Just your eyes playin' tricks!'

'Hones' ta God,' cried Juke. 'I saw it shift slow like a dead kitten!'

'Hush up, now! It's been dead a long, long time. Maybe since before you was born!'

'He made a sign!' screamed Mrs. Tridden, the mother woman. 'That's my baby, my Foley! My baby you got there! Three year old he was! My baby lost and white in the swamp!'

The sobbing broke out of her.

'Now, now, there now, Mrs. Tridden. There now. Set yourself down and stop shakin'. Ain't no more your child'n mine. There, there.'

One of the womenfolk held her and faded out the sobbing into jerked breathing and a fluttering of her lips in butterfly quickness as the breath stroked over them, afraid.

When all was quiet again, Granny Carnation, with a withered pink flower in her shoulder-length grey hair, sucked the pipe in her trap mouth and talked around it, shaking her head to make the hair dance in the light:

'All this talking and shoving words. Like as not we'll never find out, never know what it is. Like as not if we could find out we wouldn't want to know. It's like them magic tricks them magicians do at the show. Once you find the fake, it ain't no more fun 'n the innards of a jackbob.

We come collecting around here every ten nights or so, talking, social-like, with something, always something, to talk about. Stands to reason if we found out what the damn thing is there'd be nothing to talk about, so there!'

'Well, damn it to hell!' rumbled a bull voice. 'I don't think it's nothin'!' Tom Carmody.

Tom Carmody standing, as always, in shadow. Out on the porch, just his eyes staring in, his lips laughing at you dimly, mocking. His laughter got inside Charlie like a hornet sting. Thedy had put him up to it, Thedy was trying to undermine Charlie's social life, she was!

'Nothin',' repeated Carmody, harshly, 'in that jar but a bunch of old jelly-fish from Sea Cove, a rottin' and stinkin' fit to whelp!'

'You mightn't be jealous, Cousin Carmody?' asked Charlie, slow.

'Haw!' snorted Carmody. 'I just come aroun' ta watch you dumb cyppers jaw about nuthin'. I gits a kick outa it. You notice I never set foot inside or took part. I'm goin' home right now. Anybody wanna come along with me?'

He got no offer of company. He laughed again, as if this were a bigger joke, how so many people could be so dumb, and Thedy was raking her palms with angry nails back of the room. Charlie felt a twinge of unexpected fear at this.

Carmody, still laughing, rapped off the porch with his high-heeled boots and the sound of crickets took him away.

Granny Carnation gummed her pipe. 'Like I was saying before the storm: that thing on the shelf, why couldn't it be sort of — all things? Lots of things. What they call a — gimmler — '
'Symbol?'

'That's it. Symbol. Symbol of all the nights and days in the dead canebrake. Why's it have to be one thing? Maybe it's lots.'
And the talking went on for another hour, and Thedy slipped away into the night on the track of Tom Carmody, and Charlie began to sweat. They were up to something, those two. They were planning something. Charlie sweated warm all the rest of the evening. . .

The meeting broke up late, and Charlie bedded down with mixed emotions. The meeting had gone off well, but what about Thedy and Tom Carmody?

Very late, with certain star coveys shuttled down the sky marking the time as after midnight, Charlie heard the shushing of the tall grass parted by her penduluming hips. Her heels tacked soft across the porch, into the house, into the bedroom.

She lay soundlessly in bed, cat eyes staring at him. He couldn't see them, but he could feel them staring.

'Charlie?'

He waited.

Then he said, 'I'm awake.'

Then she waited.

'Charlie?'

'What?'

'Bet you don't know where I been, bet you don't know where I been.' It was a faint, derisive sing-song in the night.

He waited.

She waited again. She couldn't bear waiting long, though, and continued:

'I been to the carnival over in Cape City. Tom Carmody drove me. We — we talked to the carny-boss, Charlie, we did, we did, we sure did.' And she sort of giggled to herself, secretly.

Charlie was ice cold. He stirred upright on an elbow.

She said, 'We found out what it is in your jar, Charlie — ' insinuatingly. Charlie flumped over, hands to ears. 'I don't wanna hear!'

'Oh, but you gotta hear, Charlie. It's a good joke. Oh, it's rare, Charlie,' she hissed.

'Go — away,' he said.

'Unh-unh! No. No, sir, Charlie. Why, no, Charlie-Honey. Not until I tell!'

'Go,' he said in a low, firm voice, 'away.'

'Let me tell! We talked to that carny-boss, and he — he liked to die laughin', he said he sold that jar and what was in it to some, some — hick — for twelve bucks. And it ain't worth more'n two bucks at most!'

Laughter bloomed in the dark, right out of her mouth, an awful kind of laughter.

She finished it, snapping, quick:

'It's just junk, Charlie! Liquid rubber, papier-mâché, silk cotton, chemicals! That's all! Got a metal frame inside it! That's all! That's all it is, Charlie! That's all!' she shrilled in triumph.

'No, no!'

He sat up swiftly, ripping sheets apart in big fingers, roaring, tears coming bright on his cheeks.

'I don't wanna hear! Don't wanna hear!' he bellowed over and over. She teased. 'Wait'll everyone hears how fake it is! Won't they laugh! Won't they flap their lungs!'

He caught her wrists. 'You ain't — gonna tell them?'

'Ouch! You hurt me!'

'You ain't gonna tell them.'

'Wouldn't want me known as a liar, would you, Charles?'

He flung her wrists like white sticks into a well:

'Whyncha leave me alone? You dirty! Dirty jealous mean of ever'thing I do. I took shine off your nose when I brung the jar home. You didn' sleep right 'til you ruined things!'

She laughed nastily. 'Then I won't tell anybody,' she said.

He caught on to her. 'You spoiled my fun. That's all that counted. It don't matter if you tell the rest. I know. And I'll never have no more fun. You and that Tom Carmody. Him laughin'. I wish I could stop him laughin'. He's been laughin' for years at me! Well, you just go tell the rest, the other people, now — might as well have your fun — !'

He strode angrily, grabbed the jar so it sloshed, and would have flung it on the floor, but he stopped, trembling, and let it down softly on the spindly table. He leaned over it, sobbing. If he lost this, the world was gone. And he was losing Thedy, too. Every month that passed she danced further away, sneering at him, funning him. For too many years her hips had been the pendulum by which he reckoned the time of his living. But other men, Tom Carmody, for one, were reckoning time from the same source.

Theyd was standing, waiting for him to smash the jar. Instead, he petted and stroked and gradually quieted himself over it. He thought of the long good evenings in the past month, those rich evenings of camaraderie, conversation moving about the room. That, at least, was good, if nothing else.

He turned slowly to Thedy. She was lost forever to him.

'Theyd, you didn't go to the carnival.'

'Yes, I did.'

'You're lyin',' he said, quietly.

'No, I'm not!'

'This — this jar has to have somethin' in it. Somethin' besides the junk you say. Too many people believe there's somethin' in it. Thedy. You can't change that. The carny-boss, if you talked with him, he lied.'

Charlie took a deep breath and then said, 'Come here, Thedy.'

'What you want?' she asked, sullenly.

'Come over here.'

'No, I won't.'

He took a step towards her. 'Come here.'

'Keep away from me, Charlie.'

'Just want to show you something, Thedy.' His voice was soft, low and insistent. 'Here, kittie. Here kittie, kittie, kittie — HERE KITTIE!'

It was another night, about a week later. Gramps Medknowe and Granny Carnation came, followed by young Juke and Mrs. Tridden and Jahdoo the coloured man. Followed by all the others, young and old, sweet and sour, creaking into chairs, each with his or her thought, hope, fear and wonder in mind. Each not looking at the shrine, but saying hello softly to Charlie.

They waited for the others to gather. From the shine of their eyes one could see that each saw something different in the jar, something of the life and the pale life after life, and the life in death and the death in life, each with his story, his cue, his lines, familiar, old but new.

Charlie sat alone.

'Hello, Charlie.' Somebody glanced around, into the empty bedroom.

'Where's your wife? Gone off again to visit her folks?'

'Yeah, she run off again to Tennessee. Be back in a couple weeks. She's the darndest one for runnin'. You know Thedy.'

'Great one for ganntin' around, that woman.'

Soft voices talking, getting settled, and then, quite suddenly, walking into the dark porch and shining his eyes in at the people — Tom Carmody.

Tom Carmody standing outside the door, knees sagging and trembling, arms hanging and shaking at his side, staring into the room. Tom Carmody not daring to enter. Tom Carmody with his mouth open, but not smiling. His lips wet and slack, not smiling. His face pale as chalk, as if it had been kicked with a boot.

Gramps looked up at the jar, cleared his throat and said, 'Why, I never noticed so definite before. It's got blue eyes.'
'It always had blue eyes,' said Granny Carnation.

'No,' whined Gramps. 'No, it didn't. They was brown last time we was here.' He blinked upwards. 'And another thing — it's got brown hair. Didn't have brown hair before!'

'Yes, yes, it did,' sighed Mrs. Tridden.

'No, it didn't!'

'Yes, it did!'

Tom Carmody, shivering in the summer night, staring in at the jar. Charlie, glancing up at it, rolling a cigarette, casually, at peace and calm, very certain of his life and thoughts. Tom Carmody, alone, seeing things about the jar he never saw before. Everybody seeing what they wanted to see; all thoughts running in a fall of quick rain:

'My baby! My little baby!' screamed the thought of Mrs. Tridden.

'A brain!' thought Gramps.

The coloured man jiggled his fingers. 'Middibamboo Mama!'

A fisherman pursed his lips. 'Jellyfish!'

'Kitten! Here kittie, kittie, kittie!' the thoughts drowned clawing in Juke's skull. 'Kitten!'

'Everything and anything!' shrilled Granny's weazened thought. 'The night, the swamp, the death, the pallid moist things of the sea!'

Silence, and then Gramps said, 'I wonder. Wonder if it's a he — or a she — or just a plain old it?'

Charlie danced up, satisfied, tamping his cigarette, shaping it to his mouth. Then he looked at Tom Carmody, who would never smile again, in the door. 'I reckon we'll never know. Yeah, I reckon we won't.'
Charlie smiled.

It was just one of those things they kept in a jar in the tent of a sideshow on the outskirts of a little, drowsy town. One of those pale things drifting in alcohol plasma, forever dreaming and circling, with its peeled dead eyes staring out at you and never seeing you. . .

The end