Pearson tried to scream but shock robbed his voice and he was able to produce only a low, choked whuffling -- the sound of a man moaning in his sleep. He drew in breath to try it again, but before he could get started, a hand seized his left arm just above the elbow in a strong pincers grip and squeezed. "It'd be a mistake," the voice that went with the hand said. It was pitched only half a step above a whisper, and it spoke directly into Pearson's left ear. "A bad one. Believe me, it would."

Pearson looked around. The thing which had occasioned his desire -- no, his need -- to scream had disappeared inside the bank now, amazingly unchallenged, and Pearson found he could look around. A good-looking young black man in a cream-colored suit had grabbed him. Pearson didn't know him, but he recognized him; he sight-recognized most of the odd little sub-tribe he'd come to think of as the Ten O'clock People... as, he supposed, they recognized him.

The good-looking young black man was watching him warily.
"Did you see it?" Pearson asked. The words came out in a high-pitched, nagging whine that was totally unlike his usual confident speaking voice.

The good-looking young black man had let go of Pearson's arm when he became reasonably convinced that Pearson wasn't going to shock the plaza in front of The First Mercantile Bank of Boston with a volley of wild screams; Pearson immediately reached out and gripped the young black man's wrist. It was as if he were not yet capable of living without the comfort of the other man's touch. The good-looking young black man made no effort to pull away, only glanced down at Pearson's hand for a moment before looking back up into Pearson's face.
"I mean, did you see it? Horrible! Even if it was makeup... or some kind of mask someone put on for a joke..."

But it hadn't been make-up and it hadn't been a mask. The thing in the dark-gray Andre Cyr suit and five-hundred-dollar shoes had passed very close to Pearson, almost close enough to touch (God forbid, his mind interjected with a helpless cringe of revulsion), and he knew it hadn't been make-up or a mask. Because the flesh on the huge protuberance Pearson supposed was its head had been in motion, different parts moving in different directions, like the bands of exotic gases surrounding some planetary giant.

"Friend," the good-looking young black man in the cream-colored suit began, "you need..."

"What was it?" Pearson broke in. "I never saw anything like that in my life! It was like something you'd see in a, I don't know, a sideshow... or... or..."

His voice was no longer coming from its usual place inside his head. It seemed to be drifting down from somewhere above him, instead -- as if he'd fallen into a snare or a crack in the earth and that high-pitched, nagging voice belonged to somebody else, somebody who was speaking down to him.

"Listen, my friend --"
There was something else, too. When Pearson had stepped out through the revolving doors just a few minutes ago with an unlit Marlboro between his fingers, the day had been overcast -- threatening rain, in fact. Now everything was not just bright but over-bright. The red skirt on the pretty blonde standing beside the building fifty feet or so farther down (she was smoking a cigarette and reading a paperback) screamed into the day like a firebell; the yellow of a passing delivery boy's shirt stung like the barb of a wasp. People's faces stood out like the faces in his daughter Jenny's beloved Pop-up books.

And his lips... he couldn't feel his lips. They had gone numb, the way they sometimes did after a big shot of novocaine.

Pearson turned to the good-looking young man in the cream-colored suit and said, "This is ridiculous, but I think I'm going to faint."

"No, you're not," the young man said, and he spoke with such assurance that Pearson believed him, at least temporarily. The hand gripped his arm above the elbow again, but much more gently this time. "Come on over here -- you need to sit down."

There were circular marble islands about three feet high scattered around the broad plaza in front of the bank, each containing its own variety of late summer clay flower. There were Ten O'clock People sitting on the rims of most of these
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