dead-rat grey. Beads of milky liquid ooze out of the yellow eyes, now dull and bloodshot, and begin to rain down upon my face. They are warm, then cold and solid. The quivery, rusty voice floats down to me, “You. Are. The. New. One. Now.”

With a strength I didn’t know I had, I force myself up. I beat away the mask face and push aside the shimmering air of the room through which my scream is still echoing. Chairs and side tables fall as I crash past them. Magazines fly through the air and crash against the walls.

“Hey, fink-face! What are you doing out here? Demolition derby?” I have no voice to answer Lucas.

I reach the phone in the hall just outside the bathroom door. I grab the receiver. I dial Emergency. I wait through a century of rings. Finally someone answers.

“Do you wish police, ambulance, or fire?”

My voice is choked with sobs. “Police, oh, police. Please, hurry.”

Click. The line goes dead. Cold, gentle fingers touch the back of my neck. I drop the receiver which swings like a pendulum, banging against the wall, a dull, hollow sound.

I fall to the ground like a stone, like a piece of raw meat, and bury my face in my hands. My hands smell like skunk cabbage, no, like swamp water, no, like the bacon that somebody forgot in the back of the fridge. My face is smooth and cold and becoming more solid every second. My hair begins to move on my scalp.

They have me. I am becoming one of them. I feel my brain hardening inside my head.


I try to picture the bathroom window. Oh, please, let him be skinny enough to get through it. My mouth is becoming rigid. I use up my last human words, “Lucas, break the window. Get out. For pity’s sake, don’t come out here.”

Then silence. The only sound is the telephone receiver thudding against the wall.

“Amy? You’re just kidding, aren’t you? That was pretty good. You know if you weren’t so funny-looking you could probably become an actress.”

Silence.


Beep, beep, beep. The telephone’s humanoid voice rings out in the silent hall. “Please hang up and try your call again. If you need assistance dial your operator. Please hang up now.” Beep, beep, beep.

The bathroom door opens slowly. I’m curled up behind it. I hold my breath. Two steps, that’s all I need. Two measly steps.