

the
doom
machine

a novel by

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one . . .
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1. VERN HOLLOW, 1956

THE MORNING of the invasion, Jack Creedle got up early, as usual. He dragged his newspapers onto the porch, then slipped into the darkness to get his bike.

Jack lived at the Pines with his mother, who ran the place, and his uncle Bud. It was a boardinghouse, and not a fancy one. He had another uncle who lived across town, and three others he didn't know very well because they were locked up.

Jack had been locked up, too, until recently. When he came

home, his mom got him the paper route. "It'll keep you out of trouble," she said. But trouble always found him, like it found all the Creedles—mixed up in things that were illegal or just plain stupid. They were a trouble-prone family.

Jack's own problems had started a year earlier when he was caught trying to swipe a math test from the filing cabinet in Mrs. Mousewemple's room. What made it so bad, from a legal point of view, was that it happened at three A.M. on a Sunday morning. That meant it wasn't just theft, it was breaking and entering.

What made it stupid was that he didn't even care about math. He'd done it on a bet with an eighth grader named Ray Falco. Only it turned out Ray was in cahoots with Jack's arch-enemy, Grady Webb, and the whole thing was a setup. As soon as Jack wormed his way through the classroom window, the light went on, and there was Mrs. Mousewemple—with Sergeant Webb, Grady's dad, standing right behind her like a TV cowboy, his feet wide apart and one hand hovering over the butt of his revolver. They'd sent Jack to Millbrook for that one.

He liked the paper route, the freedom of moving alone through empty streets, but even there, trouble was always lurking. There was the newspaper war, for one thing—*Sentinels* versus *Couriers*. Jack was a *Sentinel*. His boss, Mr. Anastasio, had given him a route that straddled *Courier* territory all the way.

Grady Webb was a *Courier*.

Jack moved quietly up the driveway. The trick was to get his bike out of the barn without waking up Milo, the rooster. They had been friends once, but not anymore. Growing up had made the chicken mean. He was a typical Creedle in that way. They all got worse with age.

When he opened the barn door the hinges yelped, but Milo didn't stir. Jack grabbed his bike and hurried back to the house. Milo was a pretty sorry rooster when you thought about it. Dawn was the time he was supposed to crow his tiny head off, but the chicken didn't care—it was too cold.

Jack thought wistfully of his own bed. Bundled up under two sweatshirts and a corduroy jacket, with the earflaps on his hunting cap pulled down, he still felt chilly. His newspapers were already folded and stuffed into canvas saddlebags, so he straddled the bike, pushed off with one foot, and pedaled away.

On the far side of the train trestle he turned onto Church Street and sat up straight, burying his hands in his armpits to keep them warm. Here and there a porch light was on, but most of Vern Hollow was still asleep. Smedley Trowbridge claimed that weird stuff was more likely to happen when everybody was sleeping. He said it was only “the power of conscious thought” that kept things normal most of the time.

Jack wasn't sure about that. Smedley also claimed he saw a pterodactyl once, flying over the Wanookie River just before dawn. Smedley was a *Sentinel*.

He threw his first newspaper into the Olafskys' birdbath, cursed, and got off his bike to retrieve it. In the distance he could hear the stuttering of Mr. Vandestar's Hudson. It had been in Uncle Bud's shop once, though it probably wouldn't be back. Mr. Vandestar said Uncle Bud was a crook, and the car had more problems after he got it back than it had going in. That was technically true. Uncle Bud *was* a crook, but he didn't wreck the car on purpose. He was just distracted lately.

Jack knew the car's problem was in the master cylinder; he could tell by listening to it. He thought about how he would repair it, the tools he would use and the parts he would need, if only Mr. Vandestar would give the shop a second chance.

Folks in town didn't know it, but nowadays Jack did most of the engine work they thought was being done by his uncle. The arrangement worked out well for both of them. Jack got to do more interesting jobs, the garage was getting a better reputation, and Uncle Bud could spend more time in his workshop, doing whatever it was he did in there.

From down the block Jack heard the hum of bicycle wheels. He crouched behind the Olafskys' DeSoto, listening as a couple of *Couriers* slid by like ghosts in the darkness. The one in front was Grady Webb. Jack could tell by the voice.

"I told him if he didn't give me the sandwich I'd bust him in the mouth."

"Did he do it?" The other voice was Gordon Smathers.

Grady laughed. "What do you think?"

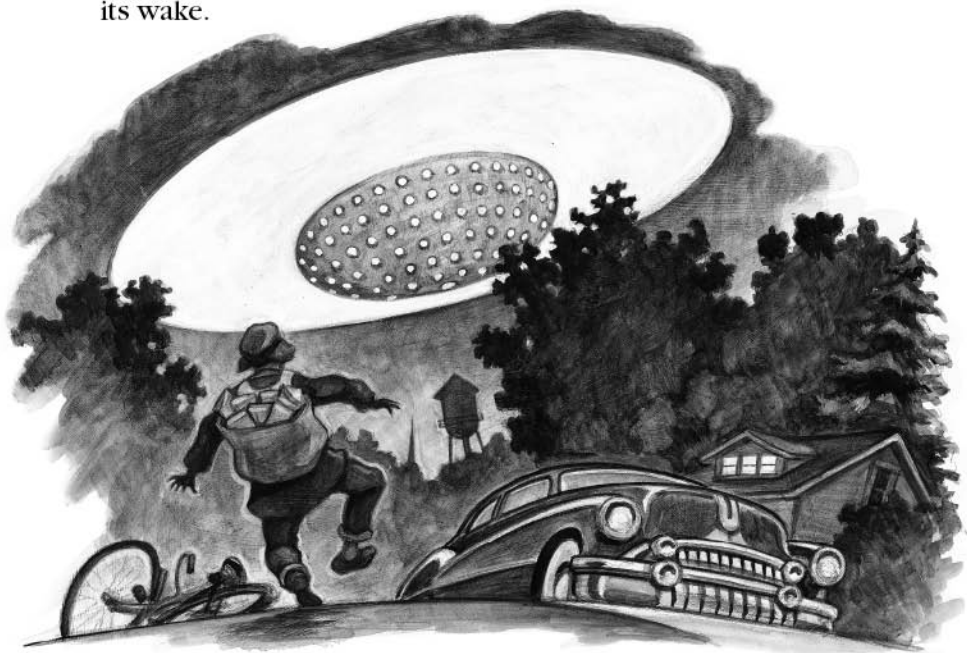
The bikes drifted away. Someday Jack would get Grady Webb. He made the vow often, not really believing it. Grady was a year older and twice his size.

He made some poor throws trying to warm up. Folded newspapers were awkward in flight. If they didn't spin like helicopter blades, they tended to fall like wounded ducks. Jack's throws skidded across driveways and belly flopped into piles of wet leaves. At the Gundersons' house his toss caromed off the back of Mr. Gunderson's supply truck, hit a maple tree, and fell neatly into an open garbage can. Jack admired the throw for its rarity. It was the kind of shot you couldn't make once in a hundred times, if you were trying. He wiped the *Sentinel* off on his jeans and carried it to the front porch.

As he was turning around he heard an odd sound, hollow like a Wiffle ball, sailing in from somewhere overhead. He looked up to a point just above the Belknaps' garage where a bright green star appeared and quickly expanded as the noise

grew louder and almost musical—like the sound a wet finger makes on the rim of a glass.

The star became a glowing turquoise disk, spinning like a Ferris wheel turned on its side. As it approached it sloughed off a gauzy mantle of pale smoke, which continued to swirl in its wake.



The saucer moved unhurriedly from horizon to horizon directly above the town. When it had traveled some distance over the unlit bulk of Dutch Woods, it stopped, hovered, and then quickly dropped. In an instant it was gone.

Jack watched the spot for several long moments, blinking. All over town dogs began to bark. Somewhere on the next block a man shouted. Jack adjusted his newspapers so the weight was evenly distributed, got on his bike, and pedaled away.