I'm curious to see how (and if) King's undergraduate writing registers the angry, in-between state of suspension that he later would articulate as the difficult "transition from boyhood to manhood" he was experiencing. Fortunately, he published some detailed records of his thoughts at the time in the forty-seven installments of "King's Garbage Truck" that he wrote for *The Maine Campus* between February 1969 and May 1970. These columns are all collected in the Kings' personal archives, but I want to read everything that was in the paper each week to get a broader view of what was happening around him when he was writing them. The full editions are only available through UMaine's Fogler Library, so that's where I go next.

I immediately notice how King often uses humor in his column to take swipes at the corruption of America's leaders and institutions—a skill that's on full display now in his witty, left-leaning social media posts.

But in one especially personal and political installment on May 15, 1969, King writes with no irony or humor. He describes a peace march that he and his peers participated in on campus and the ensuing incidents that would lead the review board to reaffirm free speech rights a few weeks later. He divides the column into four vignettes, introducing each one with the word *UGLY* in increasingly large fonts. He describes the students carrying an end tHe War banner, and then being shoved and shouted at ("When are you people going to grow up?" someone yells).

People throw eggs and rocks at them. And then, "Somebody belts me in the gut. It surprises me more than it hurts me. I want to hit somebody. I want to weep. I wonder what is happening to me." There's a confrontation with some fraternity boys: "Behind them I see Gestapo figures burning books

and Jews. I do not see political belief. I only see terrible amoral mental castration." Finally, King imagines what it might be like to bring a child into this toxic American culture: "Will my son have to kill someone in the name of national pride?"

At age twenty-one, King articulates a fearful vision that captures the pain of this chaotic, transitional moment, both in U.S. history and his own. The punch to the gut leaves him confused, angry, wanting to lash out and cry; in this sense, he's like a lost kid, wondering what's happening to him. At the

same time, he has an adult's perspective; he recognizes that history repeats itself in the form of systemic amorality (whether in Nazi Germany or Vietnam-era America)—and that it demands acts of violence, drafting its youth into service either as soldiers or as mentally castrated state agents, brainwashed to turn on their resistant peers. He also can envision what it would be like to be a father fearing for his child's future in

such a world. Growing up (*When are you going to grow up?*) can make you wiser, but not always. And it might just get you, or someone you love, killed.

In another issue, I come across a letter to the editor written by R. A. Graves, M.D., "Director Student Health Center." The aptly named Dr. Graves describes a global health crisis that's made its way to the UMaine campus: "Preliminary laboratory work reported this week indicates the epi-

demic we experienced just prior to the Christmas vacation was almost certainly due to the Hong Kong strain of A2 influenza."

I had never heard of this 1968 flu pandemic, although it killed millions of people around the world. Graves describes the symptoms of the disease and urges students to come to the clinic to get a vaccine (while supplies last): "Characteristics of Hong Kong flu are: fever, headache, body aches, nausea, and cough with or without sore throat." A few pages later, under the headline "UM victim of pre-holiday Hong Kong flu epidemic," an article notes that the flu affected "at least 10 per cent of the student body" and quotes Dr. Graves as saying that " 'the Christmas recess came just in time to alleviate further spreading of the flu on campus.' He added, however, 'I don't know how many cases spread to the families at home.' "

A few months later, King published "Night Surf" in *Ubris,* the campus literature magazine. The story is about a group of college-aged kids on a beach in Maine who have survived a global pandemic that began as an A2 strain of Hong Kong flu. It's already wiped out most of the world's population. King sold the story to *Cavalier* magazine in 1973 before including it in *Night Shift* and developing it into his epic novel *The Stand.*

I'm convinced that the real-life flu pandemic must have inspired King to write his nihilistic "Night Surf," and that I've discovered the origins of what is arguably King's greatest epic novel. I send King all of these snippets from *The Maine Campus* and await my coronation as the Greatest Literary Detective of All Time. He writes me back:

> I'm sure I was aware of A2 flu—"I had a little bird, his name was Enza/I opened up the window and in flew Enza"—but I doubt if it (or Dr. Graves) had any influence on "Night Surf" . . . We were young and thought we were going to live forever. Just like those kids who partied in Lauderdale at the height of COVID.

The nursery rhyme (developed during the 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic) is charming, but it doesn't make up for the fact that, according to the man himself, I've struck out (ah, *Ubris*!).

And yet, I think he's revealed something important here, whether he intended to or not. He wrote "Night Surf" when he was one of "those kids" who (like the ones in the story) thought they would "live forever." It sprung from his young adult imagination, while his heart and mind were processing the crises around him. In this sense, the story and King's columns speak to something universal about this in-between stage and the cognitive dissonance that accompanies it. No longer kids, but not yet adults, young people must hold two opposing concepts in their heads at once: A grim future is coming for you, and you are invincible.