

KNIFEPOINT HORROR: THE TRANSCRIPTS

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author's note

Most of the stories performed on the Knifepoint Horror podcast were written very much with the audio format in mind. Reading these transcripts is quite a different experience than listening to that lonely single voice and its augmentation through silence, sound effects, and music. My hope is that conveying the tales in text form represents such a dramatic shift that another kind of effect comes through. Maybe the spareness of it all, and the sheer momentum with which the words can be absorbed here, can take you down a strange unpaved road I never realized was there.

-S.N.

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sisters

My name is Julien Serrault. It is the 7th of January, 1882. I am an innkeeper outside the mountain town of Briancon, at the base of the French Alps. The inn does not do much trade, and in the winter months I am sometimes alone for days at a time. In recent times I have earned a pittance delivering dry goods and sundries once a month to Abbey St. Genest eight miles west. The abbey is housed in Castle Archambault, a somewhat forbidding edifice deep in the forest, accessible only by a winding road that is often made impassable by snow. In the time of Napoleon's rule, the castle had been the possession for twenty years of Count Archambault and his wife, well-respected in their day and generous with their wealth. They were found dead in their bedroom after having disappeared from public for many weeks, the victims of suicide by poison. It was rumored that the countess, Nadia by name, had dabbled in the occult and brought doom to herself and her innocent husband by seeking immortality through demonic visitations, turning the castle into an impure, accursed place habitable only by those with total purity of spirit. All nonsense, of course, a tale conjured by fools to cruelly cast doubt upon the sincerity of the count's donation of his land and riches to a church neither he nor his wife had any dealings with in life.

The abbess of St. Genest, Mother Henriette, was a gregarious woman who invariably came out to meet my wagon during a delivery and always insisted on helping me with the load while she entertained me with the latest joke she'd heard from the man who helped the sisters tend their expansive gardens. I grew fond of her over the two years I delivered to the abbey, sometimes taking the sisters' handmade crafts and pies back with me to sell at the inn. One afternoon in November I loaded up my wagon with barley, rice, cabbages, and pears and began the ninety-minute trek to the abbey to drop off the month's supplies. I got an unusually late start, and night fell as I went, the remnants of a recent snowfall settling in the woods all around me. As usual, I passed no one on my journey. The weather in these parts is unpredictable enough from October to April to dissuade any casual travelers from venturing too far into the forest. I arrived at Gola Road as day became night. The tall spires of the castle became visible through the trees a half-mile away. The road sloped upwards gradually, and a man on foot would be exhausted upon reaching the castle's front gate.

This time Mother Henriette was waiting for me just off the road, most likely having spotted the wagon from one of the castle's high windows. She laughed at my tardiness and informed me that the abbey was not accepting overnight guests no matter the color of my coin. She opened the gate so I could proceed to the storehouse, where two of the sisters would assist me in unloading the goods. I never felt less than humbled on the castle grounds, small before its immensity, although it was surely of modest size when compared with some in the Alps.

When we were done and I was to be on my way, Mother Henriette approached me holding something in her arms, something swaddled in a blue blanket. She introduced me to what she called her 'little friend,' a baby deer that had wandered onto the grounds seeking shelter. She held it fondly and maternally, explaining that the sisters had little choice but to watch after it until it could survive on its own, as its mother had never appeared. Peering through the growing dark, I saw that the deer was sleeping, its head almost completely enclosed and snug under the blanket. I told Mother Henriette I was surprised the baby wasn't awake and alert in the bitter cold, and she said she worried about that too; the poor creature often slept for hours and hours at a time. I reached a hand under the blanket and touched its little head. For some reason the deer's body was incredibly warm to the touch, disturbingly so. I mentioned this, too, to Mother Henriette, and she concurred. All they could do was pray for the beast and take care of it as best

they could. And that was my November visit to the abbey. I reached the inn by seven o'clock and settled in for the night with a book.

After falling asleep I fell prey to some terrifying dreams. I came awake well past midnight, trying to shake a vision of a gigantic undersea monstrosity crashing through the bow of a ship on which I was a mate. At the sound of a crewman screaming and the bow splitting, dooming all on board to death in the ocean, my eyes opened in my bedroom. I managed to fall asleep once again, but yet another nightmare came for me. I was tied to the ground in the woods at night, and a man whose head was encaged in a bizarre metal apparatus approached me, holding a baby high above his head. I was begging this man not to harm it, but he then stood over me, the baby crying and kicking, and without a word he slammed that poor little child down upon my left arm, undoubtedly killing the infant with the awful force of the strike. I awoke at that exact moment, a dog howling somewhere far away in the forest. I lay in my bed quite still for a moment, feeling a tingling in my left arm, as if in fact it had been struck. Then, perhaps five seconds after this terrible dream ended, an excruciating bolt of pain leapt up my arm from fingers to shoulder. A second bolt followed the first, and I rose from my bed in a panic, moving my arm into the moonlight that streamed through my window.

What I beheld caused me to cry out in horror. My arm was twisted around so drastically it was as if God himself had attached it to my body incorrectly. It had also broken in two places, white bone protruding just below my elbow. I managed to stagger three steps forward but then collapsed to my knees, weeping in agony, having no understanding of what could have happened to me. The thought that perhaps an intruder had broken in and assaulted me flitted in and out of my fevered mind, but it simply could not be. There came a final grievous bodily injury I did not even feel at first, but which asserted itself there in the dark only when I began to stumble down the stairs to the inn's bottom floor: some of the fingers of my left hand, and my entire palm, had been burned red as if I had dowsed it all in hot water. Only three or four days later did I become certain that the afflicted flesh corresponded exactly to that which had touched the tiny deer brought to me by Mother Henriette.

Not ten minutes after discovering my injuries, I made my way out to my horse and climbed onto his back with great effort so as not to have my arm strike his side. I had made no effort to wrap it; it would have been too painful. I somehow rode four miles to a veterinarian whom I knew lived in a small cottage by the main road, urging my horse to a gallop despite the fact that such jostling caused me great agony. I simply could not take my time. The veterinarian's wife answered my plaintive knocking. Though the man himself was away, she had learned much from him over the years, and somehow she was able to set my arm just well enough so that I could get two hours' rest beside the hearth and set off at dawn, she plying me with narcotic whiskey from the moment I entered that saintly woman's home.

My injuries were slow to heal, but heal they did. It was immensely difficult to operate the inn with just one young hired hand as I recovered, but I hosted only three guests in late November along with the semi-nightly visitors whose numbers I could normally count on one hand. I told those who inquired that I had fallen off a ladder while conducting a repair on the roof of the building, always privately musing upon what could possibly have caused the affliction. Nothing made any sense. Especially puzzling was the conundrum of the burns on my hand; the pain from these marks had faded quickly, but the redness remained for almost a week.

On the 12th of December a carpenter named Gorsky delivered a message to me from the abbey. It was in Mother Henriette's hand. In the note she told me that illness had overcome many of

the sisters, including herself, and that it was best if I not make my monthly goods delivery at all. She explained that they had more than enough stores to last another few weeks and that it was not worth the risk to my health to come out and make contact. I asked Gorsky how Mother Henriette had given him the letter, and he said it had simply been nailed to a post beside the abbey's front gate with a request that it be delivered to me. I thanked him, a bit worried, as the nature of the illness Mother Henriette mentioned remained a mystery. Most likely a virus had laid them low, perhaps almost all of the nineteen women who lived in the castle. More troublesome was the possibility that a sudden snowfall might cut me off from the sisters for an extra week, or even two or three possibly. If I was not able to get there on schedule and such a storm occurred, I knew they might go hungry, being desperately poor. Despite the worth of Castle Archambault, its inhabitants themselves possessed nothing beyond what they needed to survive, and I knew them often to be in ill health because their most basic nutritional needs sometimes went unfulfilled.

I awaited further news, but the next time Gorsky passed by, he said he'd seen no more communications outside the abbey's gate as he'd made his way past the day before. Sitting with a glass of Schnapps, he did mention he'd seen one thing that had given him pause. He labored to describe it to me, uncertain as to how to convey the image in words and unsure of what to make of it. The sun had been low in the sky as he'd trotted on his horse up Gola Road, the horizon orange and red, throwing everything into sharp relief. In a high room he'd seen two silhouettes, feminine ones. They were engaged in a frenetic sort of dance, he thought, though that wasn't quite right; they were locked at the arms and were spinning fast, their heads cocked back, one body urging the other toward greater and greater speed. There was nothing in this act, Gorsky said, that suggested playfulness or joy. Trees had blocked his view rather quickly, and he had been unable to get another look at this anomaly. I asked him to tell me the story again, more carefully this time, but again it led nowhere except into the parts of imagination that pondered such enigmas only in the lonely minutes before sleep.

It was approximately the 23rd of December when a most unusual visitor came to my establishment. At that time, after a snowfall of fourteen inches over the course of a single Saturday, no guests were staying at the inn, and no one at all had come in for a drink or refreshment in two days. Only when the weather warmed in late April would the inn become busy again, my life less afflicted with banal solitude. On the night I write of here the front door opened at about ten o'clock and a tall man entered, kicking snow off his boots. He offered a subdued greeting and asked if I had a room available for the night, and if I could tend to his horse. He was traveling to Font Christiane and would set out again in the morning, but he simply could not abide the wind and cold he'd come through under a waning moon. I offered him a key, and he asked me to prepare him any sort of meal if it was possible, a cold one being adequate. After I stoked the fire, I went into the kitchen to fix him turtle soup and boiled potatoes.

When I emerged into the front room with this modest repast, my guest was sitting at the table closest to the fire, gazing into it, appearing utterly exhausted. His face and his hands were chapped from the cold. He was perhaps fifty years old, had a thick red beard and somewhat sad eyes. I asked him how far he had traveled on this night, privately amazed that he should be out at all with the snow still so deep on the road. Six or seven miles, he said, especially concerned that his horse be well fed. I went to complete this errand, assuring him the animal would be given a suitable place to sleep for the night. He had finished his meal by the time I returned, and he thanked me softly as I cleared his plate. I led him to his room, which was just down a short hallway.

As I was taking my leave of him, he asked me something, finally speaking more than a few words. He asked me if I had any dealings with the abbey at the northern end of Gola Road. I said that yes, for almost two years I had delivered dry goods there on a monthly basis. He frowned severely, became keenly attentive. And had I gone there recently? he wanted to know. I explained that I hadn't, and told him about Mother Henriette's note. He advised me then to stay away from the abbey even if I did not hear from her again. He had just come from there this very night. A terrible sickness had befallen the sisters, he said, and it was vital that no one go near them. I asked him when it would be safe to visit them once again, expressing my fears that they might not have enough to eat. His response, spoken in a tired and deeply sorrowful voice, was that I should consider the poor women lost. I was flabbergasted. Lost, he said again. He had not been able to heal them. So he was a doctor then, I realized, and the satchel he carried was his medical kit. He bade me goodnight and closed the door.

I walked back to my own room, unable to fully internalize the ghastly news. I did not even worry for myself, my own health. I wondered what sort of God would allow this to happen to such pious women, but of course, disease has taken away many people of my acquaintance. The abbey was a most difficult place to live, its unfeeling stone a cruel conductor of the winter chill. I would try to learn more as time went on. The thought occurred to me that perhaps the nuns' adoption of a wild animal, even one so seemingly harmless, had brought them a devastating illness. I still remembered its odd and inexplicable warmth to my touch and the troubling imprint it had left upon my person.

It was the very next day, after my guest had left the inn without a word before I even awoke, merely leaving payment on a dining table, that someone came after him. I was asleep upstairs at nine in the morning, having drunk too much the night before while musing upon the fate of Mother Henriette and the sisters. I roused myself upon hearing a faraway knock, wincing at the residual pain in my left arm that accompanied my every hour, and opened the front door to find a lad of perhaps eighteen standing on the doorstep, weighed down by a heavy saddle bag. He asked me if Father Cerf were still here or if he had ridden on across La Durance. I told him I did not know a Father Cerf, but the lad seemed to believe he had stayed at the inn the night before. Soon enough it became apparent from the young man's physical description of my guest that the man had not been a doctor at all, but a servant of the cloth. The lad wanted to deliver a message for him from Pramorel. He shortly went on his way, visibly upset at the thought of having to follow him through the snow all the way to Font Christiane.

As the days passed and the precious few who came to the inn seemed to have no more information about the abbey, I became more and more troubled by the silence. Despite Father Cerf's warning, I knew I would have to at least ride past the castle to confirm to myself that there was no way I could help the sisters, no way at all. I had decided upon a Monday morning to set out on this task, but upon stepping outside an hour after dawn, I could see the mists over the mountains swirling ominously, and I knew the snow was about to blow in on high winds. Eleven inches fell before nightfall, and the wind screamed as it swept down Clemencigne Road, stranding me at the inn for another three full days filled with loneliness and troubled thoughts.

On Tuesday night I set about a thorough cleaning of the inn's five empty rooms in an attempt to take my mind off such disconcerting matters. In the room that had been most recently inhabited, by a young and very friendly scholar who had been passing through and compiling notes for a book about the episcopacy in western Europe, I found two books that he had left behind in haste or absent-mindedness. One of these was a colorful local history of our region, penned by a man named Dufresne. I knew of him, actually; he had taught at my school when I was but a lad of seventeen. I took a chair by the fire and paged through it, ashamed at my lack

of knowledge of the area where I'd lived and done business for more than twenty-five years. When I caught sight of a mention of Count Archambault, I read more slowly and observantly. There was a detailed account of the count's improvements to the land and the general area around it during his life, as well as the revisions he had engineered concerning the way the people of Briançon were represented in government. But the pages also bore mention of his curious death beside his wife, who had also expired from poisoning, almost certainly by their own hand.

Five years after they passed, and one year before the Catholic church officially took possession of the land according to Archambault's will after much legal dispute, the castle was inhabited by a respectable family named Roucet. They became the center of a mystery, as all nine family members disappeared without a trace sometime in the year 1809, including two young children. Those who came to the castle in response to a curious lack of communication found the place well-appointed as always, but completely empty, the family's horses unfed and dying. No explanation for their vanishing, and no trace of any of them, was ever found. It was at this time that whispers of some satanic influence within the castle took hold as never before, and those who believed that Nadia Archambault had been a witch had their notions entertained for decades. In the minds of the superstitious she was a craven temptress whose true ambition had been to reach out from beyond the grave to consume the souls of the living. From what Dufresne could surmise, much of the slander that stained her name had grown as a response to her social reticence and her rather frightful appearance. She was described as a wisp of a creature, pale as sleet, with a piercing gaze.

Then there was the apocryphal tale of a soldier boarding in Briançon who, struggling on foot through the great storm of 1801 to reach his declining mother, saw the castle rising in the distance against the stars and trudged up Gola Road in the hope that someone there might offer him a bed for the night. According to the legend, dutifully reported by Dufresne's rambling history, the soldier saw through the blowing snow a small woman, wearing neither coat nor hat nor gloves, standing with her back to him in the center of the road. When he reached her she turned and touched his chest with bony fingers, issuing him an invitation to lay with her in the castle, where she would show him all the passageways she had created for one she called 'the Conqueror.' On her forehead was marked an inverted cross. The soldier fled this woman and, upon seeing a portrait of Countess Archambault long after her death, swore it had been she whom he'd seen that night. Had he not supposedly been one of Napoleon's most trusted captains by that time, the story would certainly have been resigned to the ages without a fuss.

As I write these words, it is 4:10 a.m. on the 7th of January. I find myself writing as much as possible about what came well before the last four hours so as to put off the final accounting of what I have so recently seen and heard. Nothing matters in the end but what is real, not conjecture or rumor. After finally making it to the castle and witnessing all my mortal heart could bear, I have now returned to the safety of the inn and can do nothing now but tell the truth, and report all that I saw on this mournful, godless night, if only to this journal.

I could not leave for the abbey until my hired helper came to the inn to host anyone who might visit, so it wasn't until almost eight o'clock that I set out for Castle Archambault. I loaded my wagon with some goods for the sisters in the unlikely case the information I had been given

was completely wrong and they could use the assistance. The weather was passable when I left, with low winds coming from the east, a crisp but not terribly unpleasant night. On the way I saw someone coming down the road in the other direction, a solitary man on horseback who was singing very softly to himself. Aside from this man I saw no one.

I reached the abbey's gate at about nine thirty, having traveled more slowly than normal, giving myself every chance to turn around, thinking of all the reasons I should not be on this errand. Moving onto Gola Road, I actually stopped briefly when I could spy the upper part of the castle against the sky. But in the end I overcame my superstitions. The first thing I noticed through the trees that fronted the castle, troublingly, was that there was not a single light to be seen in any of its windows. Usually the sisters lit candles well before dusk and placed one behind every pane, more for the benefit of travelers than themselves. It had always been a comforting sight to see, an image of warmth and humanity on this frigid, somnolent road that stretched for miles in either direction without any glimpse of something welcoming. Now there was just a bloodless phantasm. The building looked as if it had been empty for a hundred years. It would be very cold inside, the stone walls chilling one to the core.

The low iron gate in front was closed but not locked, not a terribly unusual happenstance. I left the wagon and my horse behind and moved through it, approaching the front door, which I had never actually parted. In my right hand I held a kerosene lantern, having prepared myself for the dark. Embedded in the door was a heavy knocker shaped like an owl, which I struck five times against the wood. I waited. No one came. I had not expected a response. I pushed gently on the door and realized it had not even been fully shut. There was no visible gap between the door and the jamb, but someone had obviously not noticed that it had never been closed. Or perhaps it had intentionally been left open. I entered Castle Archambault for the first time.

All was black within. Closing the door behind me against the light wind, I found myself in a long, draughty front hall that stretched left and right. The gloom enshrouded me, and my lantern could not show me anything that was not less than five feet in front of me. The walls around me were hundred-year-old gray stone, virtually devoid of ornamentation of any kind. I called out a greeting, my words echoing with a sad hollowness, and I received nothing in return. I chose to move to my left down the hall, stepping carefully, my eyes trained mostly downward. The floor was scratched and in many places not quite level with the earth. My foot came to rest on dead winter leaves once or twice, a sign that perhaps the front door had been left open wider and longer than it had even first seemed. The sisters would certainly have swept them out right away. I knew it was true then, that they had all perished. I needed little more proof. I wondered if Father Cerf had at least sent men to give them all Christian burials before leaving the castle to its uneasy repose.

The hallway ended at a short flight on curving steps. I ascended them, surprised at the din of my boots on the stone. Before me was a short corridor with a single room on each side. I moved forward. That was when I heard something, a faint musical note coming from the end of the corridor. Someone was at a piano, and from the depths of despair my heart leapt with hope. The same high G was being keyed again and again at three- or four-second intervals, meaninglessly. I followed the note down the corridor past closed doors bearing empty sconces. This hallway ended up ahead in a room with no barrier to entry. Holding the lantern high, I began to make out the shapes of furniture, and then its details. What I entered was a sitting room with two straight-backed chairs and little else. Turning and casting the beam of the lantern to my right, I beheld the origin of the music. One of the sisters sat at a small piano, the index finger of her right hand resting gently on that G key. She lifted it and reset it, striking the note again, for the seventh or eighth time.

There was something deeply wrong with the woman, as I saw instantly. She was completely unclothed from head to toe as she sat there in this tenebrous enclosure. My puny light revealed a naked and emaciated body. I would have looked away in shame had my eyes not been drawn irrevocably to her face. The sister, one of the younger ones at the abbey, appeared blindfolded—but then, looking harder, I saw the truth of the matter was that she had been crudely and haphazardly bandaged around the eyes. She was utterly blind as she sat there, naked and unaware of my presence. She must have been freezing, but of it she gave no sign. I did not know what to say, or if I should say nothing at all and meekly withdraw. But then she sensed my presence and took her finger from that solitary key. The sound of the note faded to nothing, and there was silence save for the sound of the wind sighing through the castle's hidden crevices. Slowly she turned her head in my direction. The bones in her face protruded unflatteringly, and her lip had been bloodied. She said to me, softly and pleasantly as if nothing in the slightest was wrong, 'Who is it that has come to visit the sisters?'

For a moment I was too taken aback to respond. Finally I managed to nervously utter my name, and state where I had come from, the plume of my breath visible before me. I apologized for my presence and assured her I would withdraw from the abbey immediately if she wished it. Out of shame I raised the lantern higher so as to direct its feeble glow only above her neck. But instead of asking me to retreat, she offered a slow, sickly smile. Even though she could not see, she seemed to be looking directly at me. She bade me stay, stay and meet the others. I swallowed hard. I could see a drop of moisture high on her cheek, and moving just a little closer could determine that what I was looking at was blood.

I asked the sister if she desired a blanket, or food from my wagon, or medical assistance. I could not stop myself from asking what was wrong with her eyes. She tilted her head strangely. She said that of course she had torn them out as soon as she'd been able. Certain that I had misheard, I leaned in ever closer and asked her to repeat her words. When she did, in a chiding tone that made me feel like a child caught not paying attention, I asked her why she had done such a terrible thing. I was barely able to get the words out. She said that the nighttime was a tolerable time but that in the day, all the sisters saw much too much of this hideous world.

I stood in stunned silence. I was about to offer my coat, nervous at the very thought of getting so near to this deranged woman, when she rose from the wooden bench in one swift motion. She was more emaciated than I had even thought at first, and a streak of wet dirt ran from her exposed hip down to her right knee. She excused herself, told me she was terribly late for vespers, and suddenly took off in a run past me, moving trustingly into the dark, arms outstretched. Instinctively I reached out to her, my fingers only brushing her shoulder, which was so cold to the touch that I would have believed her to be a corpse. She left the room and moved down the hallway, intent on leaving me behind. Mortified, I remained where I was. The light of the lantern gave me the last glimpse of her I would ever have, her short, ragged black hair matted to her skull as she vanished, feet making soft padding sounds on the stone.

It was fear that kept me in place, fear that had already overwhelmed my sense of concern and compassion. Being there in the abbey felt like being in a tomb. I knew that if I turned fully in the direction the sister had fled, I would continue out the front door, climb into my wagon, leave and never return. So I forced myself to stand perfectly still and reclaim my nerves. Thirty seconds passed, then a full minute. I shone the light around the room. There was a thin door set into the rear wall, and I went to it. As I touched the knob I felt a gelid draft swirl around my legs and heard the sound of a single dead leaf tumbling across the stone nearby. I moved through the door and closed it behind me, trying intently not to let it make a strong sound as it latched. I do not remember the turns I took then, never daring to venture up the stairs that sometimes

concluded a hallway's length. Climbing deeper into the castle before I was aware of all that was truly around me seemed a daunting, frightening undertaking. I dreaded the way the castle so effectively hid what lay ahead of me, reluctantly revealing itself in cryptic patches and sections before the slowly weakening kerosene flame.

I had no more than five more minutes navigating the lonesome abbey's narrow passageways before I received another, more ghastly shock. Suddenly the lantern's light fell upon two livid faces in the dark. I stopped short in my tracks, my heart thrumming. A pair of women stood under an archway, their backs against a cragged stone wall. They too were naked, scrawny, and they too had crudely bandaged their eyes with strips of torn cloth. Moving the lantern slightly to my left caused three more faces to appear, all of them sisters of St. Genest, once serene and humble servants of God, now unclothed, sick with some illness that had no name, and perhaps utterly insane. Almost all of them possessed a sinister grin that belied their sorry condition. The oldest of the sisters, perhaps seventy years in age, spoke. She said how delightful it was that someone other than Father Cerf should visit them and perhaps bring them treats. She hoped whoever stood before them now would be kinder than Father Cerf had been, less given to judgment.

I did not respond until another sister asked my name. I gave it. One of them offered apology that Mother Henriette was not here to receive me. When I asked where she was, another replied that she had been among the first to 'offer herself up for feeding.' I asked what that meant, and the older sister barked out hoarse laughter. 'We must show him!' she said. 'It is almost time we fed the baby in any case!' One of the group, a woman whose scarlet hair hung down completely covering her face, clapped her hands like a schoolgirl. She said in a voice almost completely strangled by pneumonia that it had become very difficult to decide who was to be fed to the baby because everyone wanted so much to be chosen. Perhaps I could decide for them. It would be a kind of game.

Feeling my own voice about to abandon me from fear, I summoned it forcefully and told the sisters before me that I was ready and willing to transport them all to the care of doctors, and that I felt there should be no delay in this regard. 'We hear so much of doctors!' the oldest exclaimed harshly. 'But we are so happy here, until the last of us has been eaten.' Another stepped forward. Her bandage was cinched so tightly around her eyes that the flesh on its borders had gone red, perhaps from infection. I jerked back as if a snake were approaching me. Perhaps, this one said, the first among them to find me and touch me in the dark would be allowed to experience the feeding this time. This thought occasioned a titter among them all, and my very blood slowed in my veins. Giggling, two more stepped forward, reaching out playfully. Their hands were filthy, as if they had been clawing in the dirt in the frozen garden outside. I shouted at them to stay back. At this they seemed to freeze in mid-motion, and expressions of surprise and genuine offense crossed their sallow faces. There was silence. Then the eldest said if I did not wish to play, I could not speak during the choosing. 'Come, sisters, to the great hall, so we can finish tonight's event!' she said.

They all turned to the north, toward the direction I had originally been set on, and moved as swiftly as their blindness allowed toward some unknown destination. I followed, amazed and dismayed at how easily they made their way, as if they'd been blind since birth. Only one of them seemed to need her hands to feel her way, and I wondered in some dim corner of my mind if perhaps she had been the most recent to take out her eyes, or beg another to perform this task. The agony of that act must have caused their frail bodies to decline that much more quickly. All were near death, I knew. At what point Father Cerf had given up on these wretches was a mystery. Perhaps he had been here for only a few minutes, or perhaps even days before

he had judged the sisters beyond hope, living cadavers to be abandoned. But it seemed bizarre to me that he'd simply not had them taken in, committed, to be later healed. There was nothing contagious here, it seemed. The real illness nested deep inside their minds.

I followed them until dim light appeared up ahead; then I hesitated before moving forward again. We were entering the center part of the castle, the great main room where Count Archambault and his wife had once staged lavish balls. The room was gigantic, cavernous, and full moonlight shone through frosted windows built into the high ceiling. The furnishings here consisted of nothing more than seven or eight wooden tables ranked along the wall so that the entire floor space was open, lending the place an intense echo and a miasma of gloom and desolation. The brainsick sisters gathered in the center of the space in a pool of that moonlight, seeming to know just where to stop. The eldest clapped her hands and said, 'Now, who shall it be tonight?'

One sister spoke up quickly, offering that she should be the one to end her life, since she had been the coldest for so many nights, and sometimes she could still make out shadows through one of her eyes, which was too great a burden to bear. This woman's bandage had slipped down some from her brow, and I had seen a terrible indentation and scar there that had not fully healed. Despite the protests of two other sisters, the eldest silenced them and said it was just that this sufferer be released from her bonds, and should be offered to the baby tonight. At these words the volunteer beamed, but then expressed her concern that the baby might not be awake to receive her. The eldest said they must all call to him to make sure he awoke.

There came the most horrible, most haunting hymn I have ever heard expressed by human voices, as the sisters began in unison a grim performance of some song I feel no man on earth has ever heard, an eerie, atonal convocation in a language utterly foreign to my ear. They all knew every word by heart and sang with their faces to the ceiling, their bodies rigid. I cannot prove, but would swear on the King James Bible that the sky as glimpsed through the windows above us changed ever so slightly, becoming tinged with a murky crimson color for just a moment as the song faded blessedly into nothing but a ghostly echo. It might only have been an anomaly in the adjustment of my night vision to the unfamiliar surroundings, but it had been so vivid that this change in the sky and nothing other was what had caused me to look upwards. No sound I would ever hear again could be so disturbing, or so I thought in that instant, for what followed was indeed worse.

At the eastern end of the space was a pair of huge oaken doors that must have led out into the courtyard where I had sometimes left my deliveries. Bordering that courtyard, I remembered, was a lovely garden that in spring hosted a profusion of daffodils and irises. The eldest sister turned in my direction and said that if I was still here, now I would see how well they had all fed the baby who had come to them as a tiny and wounded victim of this unforgiving world. Almost immediately after she spoke, I heard from beyond those doors a shifting movement as of something of great size coming forward. After that came the sound that sent a thunderous shiver all through me, causing my recovering left arm to ache and my flesh to tingle so sharply it was as if I had been stung by a thousand bees. There was a baritone animal grunt from the courtyard, and then a low, shaky growl throatier than a grown lion's. I should have fled then, but instead I watched as the naked volunteer strode without hesitation toward the doors, even the soft pads of her feet creating echoes. The sisters encouraged her as she groped clumsily for the heavy wooden beam that served as a locking mechanism and barred whatever beast that crouched in the cold outside from entering the castle.

With whatever strength she had left in her broken body, the damned woman lifted the beam and pushed her way out into the night. Leaves rushed in and the wind curled its icy fingers

around me. The sisters seemed unaffected as they clapped and called out happy goodbyes, never calling the poor volunteer by her given name. The right-hand door swung backward and, aided by the wind, slammed heavily shut. From outside there came a high-pitched, twisting, rising animal shriek, causing me to seal my eyes shut and turn away, tears spilling down my cheeks. The creature, the baby that had gorged itself on human flesh and soul to become a behemoth, snarled, and I thought I heard a wet clamping sound and a thud of something hitting the earth.

I ran then, abandoning the women to whatever horrors fate had in store for them. Thrusting the lantern forward, I forced myself to move as fast as my feet would carry me. The worst thing I could possibly do was take a wrong turn in that accursed labyrinth, and yet it happened. Beyond the sitting room where I had encountered the woman at the piano, I went stupidly in the wrong direction, which I realized quickly when I came to an intersection that would take me either east or west from a wall on which hung a painting depicting the selling of Joseph into Egyptian slavery. As I turned I looked behind me to quickly make certain I was not being followed. The light fell across something in the shadows, something only three feet in front of my face. I had missed it in the dark. I was looking at a pair of legs, legs attached to a nude body hanging from an overhead beam. One of the sisters, whom I recalled as an enthusiastic helper in assisting with my deliveries, dangled at the end of a piece of shredded blanket, her eyes open and gazing directly at me through soiled black hair. I looked at her for no more than a moment, sparing no more time for pity, then retraced my steps.

Soon I found myself again in the front corridor. There the temperature within the abbey was at its coldest, digging into the very marrow of my bones, yet I felt impossibly graced to make out the main door with my ever-evolving vision. My lantern, which by now produced no more than a candle's glow, extinguished itself just then, having lasted exactly as long as I had needed it, for which I will be eternally thankful to whatever force delivered me from that interior hell. I pushed on the door and went out into the night. The droplets of snow that had been sifting down from the sky upon my arrival had become larger flakes, promising a prolonged fall. As I neared my wagon I endured the final jolt of seeing two human shapes coming towards me, nothing more at first than indistinguishable shadows. I halted and prepared to defend myself however I could from harm, but was immeasurably relieved to find that these were two healthy men, heavily fortified against the winter conditions by many layers of heavy clothing. One of them carried a hunting rifle. He commanded me to remain where I was while they approached. I did as he requested, and it was now a stranger's turn to raise a lantern to illuminate my own terrified face.

After I identified myself to the gun-bearer, who was quite young while his companion was well advanced in years, he told me they had come at the behest of Father Cerf, and they intended to do what needed to be done inside the abbey. Understanding at once that their intention was merciless violence, I urged them to reconsider their course, pleading for mercy for the sisters, however insane they had become. And did they realize, I asked them, that there was a force here beyond our comprehension, something monstrous and perilous that might even now be roaming the castle grounds? To this the younger man replied that they were aware of precisely what they had come to confront. Father Cerf had instructed them carefully, and as representatives of the church their hands and hearts would be sure. Just as I had mistaken Father Cerf for a doctor, so now I had mistaken priests for common men. They would not leave until it had all been resolved and the abbey was cleansed of the Devil's touch. With this they brushed past me and headed in. I watched until they parted that heavy door, the old man following the younger, carrying just the one lantern between them. The time had come to

preserve my own life and never return to the abbey. And I did not wish to hear a single gunshot ring out in this once holy place.

The ride back to the inn held nothing fearful beyond the harsh elements and the hidden mysteries of the forest. I sit here now in my room as the first blue hints of dawn tinge the sky, marking it exactly seven hours since I left the abbey. I wish now that I had urged the men to come to the inn when they had completed their infernal work, so that I could know they had managed to leave the sisters without coming to mortal harm. I have no way of knowing if they were successful in returning the abbey to the state it knew after the strange death of Count Archambault and before four generations of nuns called it their home, a state of emptiness and hollow echoes, neither good nor evil. How I wish two strangers would soon knock on my door seeking food and drink and rooms where they could sleep off their exhaustion. I cannot rest tonight knowing there's still a chance that Father Cerf himself might be the next to come, to stand on my doorstep and inquire after those men, ask me if I knew why they had never returned from their nighttime journey into the forest. Worse still, perhaps the knock that comes from outside will be softer, weaker, that of a frail and eyeless woman who wishes me to visit her once again before she offers herself to a sinister entity no one living dares name.

town

My name is William Roydon. In October of 2005, I was checking the local paper for job listings, looking to make a few extra dollars with my video camera between wedding gigs, when I came across an ad from a man looking for a videographer for a day. He was offering five hundred dollars to anyone with a high-quality camera who was willing to sign a confidentiality agreement about the job. I sent an email explaining why I was suitable for this task, and two days later I got a response. I was to meet this man, who said his name was Forsch Cording, in the town of Robin Song, Virginia, where I was born and lived until I was twelve years old. I return there from my home in Annapolis two or three times a year to visit my grandfather. According to Cording's deal, I would be paid in cash and I would be asked to turn over the tapes I had made at the end of the day, never speaking of them again. Another email assured me that there was nothing illegal or distasteful about the job, and I was intrigued.

Before the day I met Cording, he asked me to call him so he could explain what we would be shooting. I dialed a number with a Pennsylvania area code, and he told me very little, other than that we would be on our feet all day long, and I would be expected to keep the camera rolling continuously. The footage he needed to acquire was for a personal research project about the area. Mostly what he wanted to know on the phone was my history with the town of Robin Song, and if I had been aware growing up of just how many unexplained crimes and disappearances there had been in the town. I truly was not. He told me I might think of it very differently after the 9th of October, and he did not want me to do the job if what I saw and heard there could irreversibly damage relations with anyone there or my childhood memories of being raised in Robin Song, which were all happy ones. I didn't understand what he meant, but I said I didn't think it would be a problem.

When I got off the phone, I looked up the name 'Forsch Cording' online to make sure I wouldn't discover any information that would keep me away from the job, which as described left the door open to any number of troubling scenarios. I could find out very little about my employer other than that he had apparently been a professor in the ancient studies department at the University of Toronto within the past five years. His name also came up in vague relation to something called the Projet du Méridional. This was mentioned on three different academic sites having to do with the study of anthropology. The phrase came up a fourth time on a dubious-looking site dealing with the paranormal. It described the Projet du Méridional as an urban legend among fringe academics having to do with a privately funded group of five men, one of whom was named Forsch Cording, who had traveled the world for two years researching a supposed curse that had stricken an Irish family. The details were sparse.

On the morning of the 9th, I took the train from Maryland to the western edge of Robin Song and walked from there to my grandfather's house at the end of Brian Lane, carrying the Sony camera I had used to eke out a living for the past three years. In fact, I had been in town with it ten months before, shooting some preliminary location shots for a very friendly independent movie producer named Trent. I had met him through a friend of a friend of mine, and for several hours we had driven around town as he looked for locations to film part of a low-budget horror movie. That day's casual shooting of churches, parks, and cemeteries had turned into more of a private documentary for Trent. He had grown up nearby in Hasham, and he had me get shot after shot of the nicest parts of Robin Song in order to convince his wife to move there so they could raise their children in a pleasant suburb.

The 9th of October was the day after my grandfather's eighty-fifth birthday. I spent a couple of hours with him before I was to meet Cording. He had gotten visibly more frail since I had seen him in March. We sat on his front porch on the quiet nine acres where I had spent much of the fifth through thirteenth years of my life. Without mentioning what I would be doing the rest of the day, I asked him if he regretted never really leaving the town during his life except to fight in World War Two, where he had been severely wounded by a Japanese bayonet in the Pacific. He told me he loved this place, and the only time he had any doubts about it was during a period of five years in the nineteen seventies when he said things had gotten 'very sad, and very painful.' When I asked him what he meant, he shook his head and said he was sorry; he didn't want to explain it. I left him at about 10 a.m.

I met my employer for the day, Cording, at the Robin Song commuter train station. He was younger than he sounded on the phone; couldn't have been more than thirty-five. He was tall and gaunt, and his jeans had holes in them. He shook my hand without a smile and immediately took me aside to hand me the money I had been promised, in twenty-dollar bills. He pressed the confidentiality agreement against a fare card machine so I could sign it on the spot. After he asked me a few technical questions about the specs of my camera and the duration of the blank tapes I had brought, we walked out of the station into a very light drizzle. Then he began to give me some instructions.

I was to tape Cording and our surroundings constantly wherever we walked, which would probably be all over town, often doubling back if we had to. If I began to come close to running out of tape, I was to alert him and we would stop for a moment. There would be a short break in the middle of the day so that I could recharge the camera battery. Though we wouldn't be talking to anyone specific or venturing into any places that were illegal or dangerous, he said I would most likely see or hear things that unsettled me. All our lives, he explained to me, we are conditioned to fear certain imagery, sights and sounds that our minds naturally perceive as foreign and disturbing. The important fact for me to remember, he said, was that these things

absolutely could not touch me. It wasn't possible. So whatever my fears were, I was to just keep going and recording. I said I understood, though inwardly I was quite confused.

Cording spoke almost not a word to me after our initial meeting at the train station. He walked along in silence. I hung back a few steps and trained the camera on the widest shot I could in order to get as much of the surroundings as possible. Having grown up in Robin Song, I was clueless as to what Cording was possibly hoping to see. He seemed unfamiliar with the layout of the town, and it became obvious he had not been there often. He would walk in one direction for a quarter-mile or a half-mile, then stop to think for a moment and go in another direction, seemingly at random. He turned again and again, never telling me why we were going toward any particular place. He walked quickly, and I had some trouble following him while keeping him in the camera frame. He seemed to be looking for something, but I couldn't tell what. He did not enter any stores or go onto anyone's property, or seem very interested in the faces or the traffic that went by us. From Schuykill Road I remember we went toward Allen Street, then Rosanda, cutting across Mabry Road to Dovetail Lane. I remember thinking that no matter how little there actually was to see here, at least I was going to get a very good workout that day.

After five minutes or so on the Cotton Branch Trail, which is a bike and footpath that runs for eight miles toward Goldmond, Cording left it and walked over into a small thicket of trees that seemed to have no particular meaning. He stood there, seeming to concentrate, for such a long time that I was about to ask him why we had stopped completely. Before I could, he said, sort of testily, 'I need to just listen, I need to just listen,' and he closed his eyes for a full two minutes. I pointed the camera up the trail, having nothing better to shoot. When he opened his eyes again, he shook his head, angry for some reason. He muttered something under his breath that sounded like, 'We'll never find her today; I know it.' He had me stop taping for a moment, roll back the last two minutes, and play them on the display screen while the sound came through a tiny speaker on the side of the camera. I wondered why he would want to watch himself standing there with his eyes closed. But while the video showed nothing but that and my occasional bored panning shots, the audio was different.

The sounds of the breeze and faraway traffic were still there, but something else was on the audio track too. It was completely clear. It was the voice of an old woman, singing what sounded to me like a sad folk song, in a thick African dialect. She sang weakly and faintly. It sounded like she was standing only about ten feet away from the microphone. This went on for almost sixty seconds. I was baffled. I had heard nothing as I was recording, and there had certainly been no one around us. When the camera panned, the voice was heard more faintly, suggesting the singer was standing very close to Cording and was briefly abandoned by the unidirectional microphone. On the video screen, I could see Cording turn his head slightly in the middle of the song when there was an unusually long pause between words. He didn't seem surprised as he watched the tape. He told me to start recording again from that point, and we moved on. I wanted to play the tape again and again to figure out just what had happened. But it was obvious that Cording had not come here to entertain my questions.

In Robin Song there is a small muddy creek called Rachel's Arm, which flows out of the Beloit River. Sometime around eleven, I followed Cording along its bank. The drizzle had stopped completely, and the sky above us was thick with clouds but dry. He stopped near the creek's endpoint and turned to me. He appeared to be appraising me somehow, considering how to proceed with me. Then he began to speak. I suppose he suddenly felt the need to start to slowly explain things. But he gave me no background about himself or his task. Instead he told me a frightening story, one that I was already somewhat familiar with, but I didn't reveal this to him.

He said that about fifteen years ago, a couple of kids had been playing beside this creek when one of them noticed a hand sticking out of the water. When they pulled on it, a mannequin came out, streaked with mud. It was dressed clumsily in a suit, and its face was very carefully painted to look like someone specific, right down to the brown eyes. The mannequin's pink plastic skin had been painted over, from head to toe, with a more realistic beige color. Clumps of human hair, real human hair, had been very carefully fastened to the head. Inside the suit was a wallet, and it belonged to a psychiatrist who had gone missing the month before while on his way to see some relatives in Washington, D.C. His name was Steen.

The face of the mannequin looked just like Steen did on the driver's license photo inside the wallet. The resemblance was uncanny. The police had already talked to all of his patients since his disappearance and gone through his private notebooks looking for any clues about who might have possibly abducted him, but then they realized that the creek called Rachel's Arm was only about five hundred yards away from the home of a patient of his, who was named Irwin Settle. One of the lead detectives in the case had already entertained the notion that Settle was possibly the killer because he'd been ordered into treatment as part of a previous assault case and because Steen's notebooks had made note that Settle's hobby in life was model trains, which he painted in detail, incredibly careful detail. He'd had no perfect alibi for the night that Steen had gone missing, but otherwise there was no hard evidence on which to arrest him. They went up again to talk to him, this time with a search warrant.

When they got to his little white house, which sat on the top of a hill looking down towards the creek, something was wrong with it. It looked like someone had started to paint the front of it brown, and then suddenly stopped. It was just a bunch of messy wandering stripes that went nowhere. Irwin Settle was not there to let them in. They detected a strong smell right away. Inside the house they found the body of his psychiatrist rotting on the living room floor. Steen had been beaten until he was squashed almost flat. It became obvious that Settle had tried to paint the front of his house with Steen's blood, and at his trial it came out he had done it to laugh at his neighbors, who had no idea what was happening. They just went past it day by day as it dried there.

The police found out from Settle's diary that his hatred for Steen was so intense that he'd painted mannequin after mannequin to look like him, and then he'd pretend to kill them in various ways, by burning them, stabbing them, hanging them. He was trying to stop himself from doing the real thing, but finally, after several hostile psychiatric sessions with Steen in which Steen got Settle to admit to a history of necrophilia, he snapped and abducted the man. Before that night, he'd dolled up and painted so many mannequins to look like Steen that they kept accidentally digging them up all over Robin Song for another two years.

Cording told me they executed Settle in 1997. One of the last things he said in court, supposedly, was that he wished he was different, but the town had made him sick. Cording pointed up the hill toward Settle's house. I could actually see the edge of it through the trees, which during the prior two weeks had lost most of their leaves. I knew the story of what Settle had done. As a twelve-year-old, I had once gone with some friends to the property and dared them to go inside the house, which had been abandoned since he'd been put in jail. We never set foot inside. We had been too scared.

When Cording was finished speaking, giving me no context for the story, he turned and walked on. We went for another twenty minutes or so until we came to Mount Halcyon Cemetery on Ridge Road. It's a sprawling place, one of the biggest cemeteries in southern Virginia. It slopes gently up a long hill and is bordered by a cremation garden. Cording walked very slowly through it, looking more at the sky than the headstones that surrounded us. I got the sense that

he was headed toward a certain grave. We went on a long straight line toward the very opposite edge of the cemetery. There, the acreage petered out into a quiet field screened by trees from Bowler Avenue. The graves became more scattered and more understated. Cording walked up to one of them.

The headstone was not even marked with a last name, just a first name and a date: Sarah, December 7, 1985. He stood over the grave for a minute with his eyes closed. He told me that he had been beside this grave twice before in the past, and it had given him a feeling he could not explain. Now, as he stood over it again, he said the feeling was the same. He did not elaborate. He knew nothing about who was buried here, only that he suspected it was an infant. I kept silent. Finally he moved away. He kept staring at that one name on the stone, as if he were unable to make sense of the letters.

As we left the cemetery the wind picked up and it became noticeably colder, and that simple and natural autumnal change in temperature made me for some reason very afraid. I very much wanted to be away from town, or at least back at my grandfather's house, having never met this man or taken his money. We walked from the cemetery all the way to Cotton Elementary School on Cedar Road. By that time, about twelve fifteen, we had already covered upwards of six miles.

Cording never told me the reasoning for his changes in direction. He would wait until he had a sense of where he wanted to go and then just go. Traffic and people passed us without noticing us. Cording very intentionally never made eye contact with a single person. He restlessly encircled Cotton Elementary, which I attended from grades one through six. There was no one else on the grounds. The playground was almost exactly as I remembered it. Then Cording told me another story. I wished he would not speak to me at all, but he did. He seemed to become more and more determined as he spoke to make me understand what he was dealing with. Unlike the story of the murderer Irwin Settle, this was one I had never heard.

Very early on a snowy December Sunday in 1999, the local airfield had received a distress signal from a Cessna 182 coming from the north into Tessa, the town just south of Robin Song. The traffic controller heard only the words 'Mayday, mayday' and then the screams of a man and a woman inside the cockpit. The plane came in over the trees on the east side of the school grounds and crashed less than two hundred feet from the playground. It cartwheeled along the ground and went into the woods, remaining mostly intact. There were three inches of snow covering the grass at the time after a heavy fall early on Saturday night. Several people in the neighborhood heard the crash, but the police and ambulance response was slower than normal because of the snow.

The first person to get to the crash site was actually an eight-year-old boy. When the authorities arrived on the scene, the boy told them what he had seen, but they did not believe him and had his parents take him away. He claimed that when he had gotten to within view of the plane's cockpit, something enormous had slithered out of it. To him it looked like a gigantic crocodile, except its skin was a perfect white, its head was quite small, and it seemed to have dozens of small legs on each side of its body, legs that grasped the side of the plane and held tight as it moved. Its breathing was very loud and sounded like a man's snoring but was much deeper. The boy said the creature had moved quickly, going deeper into the woods and disappearing.

Inside the cockpit, the authorities found the remains of two people, a man and a woman. They had been completely ripped apart, their heads, arms, and legs torn off their torsos. There was no possible way the crash could have done that sort of damage to them. The cockpit was almost entirely intact. A policeman noted in the report that there was a long, winding indentation in

the snow starting from the ground outside the cockpit and moving into the trees. But no one else was found.

Cording told me that several months after the crash, he was finally allowed, through a secret contact in the state police, to search an archive of the man and woman's possessions. They had married each other in 1987 and had lived mostly in Egypt. Cording said he believed they had been coming to this place on that day in order to confront someone, but 'she got them first.' Once again, he left me with questions I didn't feel ready to ask. I put a new tape into the camera and we moved on. My legs were getting tired. Cording never slowed his step.

The day was unexpectedly divided in two after a bizarre incident. As we crossed through a small park off Lords Street consisting of nothing but a couple of basketball courts and a wide patch of grass, Cording suddenly stopped and swore angrily under his breath. He was looking to the edge of the park, where a man was sitting slumped awkwardly against a bench as if his body were completely broken. Cording started to walk toward him, and I followed, but he turned and told me to stay where I was. Cording went over to the man and crouched before him. I could tell he was speaking to him, but I couldn't hear anything.

The man was dressed only in torn sweatpants and an old Domino's pizza t-shirt, and he wore nothing on his feet at all. He had pulled what looked like a white sheet around his neck, for warmth. It bunched awkwardly around him and draped down almost to the ground. He moved only his head, turning it very, very slowly toward the sound of Cording's voice. He looked to be only in his early twenties with long, unwashed hair. Cording spoke to him for almost five minutes. More and more I noticed how awfully pale the man's skin was, drained of all color, almost a light gray hue. When Cording stood and walked back towards me and the camera, leaving the man to sit undisturbed, he seemed furious. He said nothing to me as he passed me. I got one last shot of the man on the bench and then kept up with Cording. The man's head was cocked back, and he gazed at the sky.

Cording went only as far as the closest bus stop. He said he had something to do. A bus came quickly and we got on board. Cording asked the driver if it went straight down Lords Street. I could have told him that it did. This was the same bus, the A3, that I had taken home from school sometimes when I was growing up. We traveled about a mile and then got off the bus in a lower-income residential neighborhood called Glendyn. We walked deep into it, past modular houses and a few trailer homes, until the road simply ran out. There was a small green house beside the dead end. Its lawn was overgrown, and no one had yet made any attempt to rake the fall leaves out of it. Instead of a driveway, a single car was parked on an improvised dirt area beside some trash cans.

Cording crossed the lawn quickly and strode up to the front door. He had obviously been there before. He moved so quickly that I almost had to trot to keep up. Cording banged on the front door. At first there was no answer, so Cording began calling out loudly again and again for someone named Mr. Coaklin. Eventually he got a response, and we heard a weak, gravelly, drunk-sounding voice from behind the door. The man would not open it, though. Cording demanded that Mr. Coaklin tell him why we had just seen his son in the park. The answer came back after a long pause: 'I don't know.'

This upset Cording even more. He informed Mr. Coaklin that his son was still 'holding the sheet you wrapped him in.' He asked Coaklin what he intended to do about it. Again, the answer came

in a sad, tired voice: 'I don't know.' Cording yelled at Coaklin through the door, saying that this was absolutely the last time anything like this was going to happen, and that now Coaklin would either let the boy rest or Cording would take permanent action. Coaklin didn't respond. The last thing Cording said to him was to ask if he had a shovel in his shed. Cording walked around the side of the house, past a forgotten tomato garden, to the dilapidated shed. He rummaged through it for a moment and came out with a rusty shovel. With it, we walked back to the bus stop. As we waited for the bus to pick us up going in the opposite direction, Cording said that what he needed to do might take a while, and that he might need my help. This sent a shudder down my spine.

We rode back to the park. When we got off the bus, Cording saw right away that Mr. Coaklin's son was no longer on the park bench. Cording turned to me, looking ill, and said he thought he knew where he had gone. He changed his mind on the spot and said he didn't want what was to come next recorded on videotape. He instructed me to recharge my camera battery and meet him in two hours on the far side of the park. Then he left me, walking toward Rudwick Road with the shovel. In a daze, I shut off the camera. I tried to think of where I might recharge my camera battery, and walked down the road three quarters of a mile into Cheltenham, the neighborhood where my best childhood friend had lived. He still lived there, as far as I knew, with his parents. I went to his house, needing to sit down and relax. I convinced myself as I walked that if Steve were home, I would not tell him what I had seen or what I was doing. Only later, if I was able to tell him without anyone else ever finding out, would I do that.

Steve was home and had just gotten out of bed. He was happy to see me, and I told him I had been in the area taping a wedding reception. We sat in his basement and talked about old times. He noticed that I looked a little sick, but I told him I was just getting over the flu. I turned our talk to what Robin Song was like after my parents had moved us to Annapolis at the age of thirteen. Steve had never really liked the town that much, but he didn't seem able to leave, never having found his life's purpose. In his early twenties, just a few years before, he'd had a breakdown and spent some time in the hospital. I wasn't sure if he had even worked since then.

He reminded me of the Halloween night when we were eighteen when he had driven all the way to Annapolis unexpectedly to see me after he'd gotten a bad scare in Robin Song that he'd felt foolish about later. He'd been a little drunk and high and searching on foot for a party he knew about, and he got lost in a neighborhood he'd been in many times. He had started thinking about a murder that had taken place in Robin Song a few months before. A blind girl who had once attended his high school was abducted from a local pharmacy and killed. Her captors hadn't believed she was blind, so they had actually taped up her eyes before they killed her. After that, people said that whenever anything was broken or damaged around town, it was the girl's ghost blundering around sightless. Steve said that there really were all sorts of police reports at that time of statues, trash cans, and street signs being knocked over with no apparent purpose.

Early on Halloween night he had made the mistake of going on the Internet and finding a picture of what the girl's face had looked like when she was found, and that night as he walked alone through the streets he got very frightened, so frightened he got it into his head to get in his car and drive all the way to my house nonstop. Somehow he got there okay. I remembered that night well. I asked him if Robin Song seemed like a place where strange things often happened. He said, 'Oh, God, of course.' There had been a couple of disappearances that very week. He tried in vain to remember the details of another rumor that had floated around Robin Song, one from our elementary school days, something about a baby that had been found burned beyond

recognition at St. Martin's Church and buried in town never having been accurately identified. I vaguely remembered what he was talking about.

I left Steve's house eventually after asking him to visit me soon. On the way down the street, his parents passed me in their car coming home. They got out to speak to me. They had seemed very old when I'd known them as a teenager, and now they were quite elderly. They told me that just a few weeks ago, Steve had been found wandering in Mount Halcyon Cemetery, having heard voices recently, strange female voices, every day at about dawn, telling him to go there and make sure that certain graves weren't visited, or even touched. They had begun to worry about him again. They weren't sure what sort of treatment he was going to need next. I left them and went slowly back to the park on Lords Street.

There I found Cording sitting on the ground, legs crossed, smoking and looking out over the road. He appeared exhausted. His clothes were streaked with dirt, and there was a nasty scratch on the back of his right hand. The shovel was gone, but in one hand he now held the dirty white sheet that Mr. Coaklin's son had with him on the bench. Without a word to me, he gestured for me to start the camera again. He got to his feet, and the second part of our day in Robin Song began. Things went from bad to nightmarish very quickly.

We walked. I remember going past all the minor landmarks of Robin Song that I used to think nothing of but now seemed sinister to me. We walked seemingly without purpose, slowly making our way back toward Mount Halcyon. After almost a full hour of wandering, we came to an anonymous little forested area beside a self-storage rental facility where a steady trickle of water flowed through the mud between two cement pipes as tall as we were. There, Cording told me he needed to 'attract.' It was going to make him incredibly weak, he said, but it needed to be done before the entire day was lost. He might need my help walking at first when he finished.

He descended the small bank beside the tiny stream with that white sheet in his hand, steadying himself by grabbing onto weak tree branches, as I and the camera watched him. He crouched and dipped the sheet into the slowly running water; then he pushed it deeper, into the mud below. He held his hands there, eyes closed, for a full minute. When he brought them above the surface again, the sheet was black with mud. Water dripped steadily from it. He ascended the bank again. He moved away almost as if he had forgotten I was there, and I had to catch up.

In ten minutes we were back in the cemetery. Cording walked all the way there with his hands and the sheet covered in mud. People had noticed, but they said nothing. Most were too busy shrinking against the cold wind that was getting stronger and stronger, blowing dead leaves everywhere. Cording went toward the eastern edge of the cemetery, toward the grave he had stood at before. Frightened, I hung back as much as I could. No one else was around in the entire cemetery. I watched Cording crouch deeply at the knees and fold the wet filthy sheet several times until it was an almost perfect square. Then he placed it softly on the patch of earth in front of the infant's grave. He said something to me I couldn't hear, so I moved closer. He was asking me to help him up. I put the camera down for just a moment and put my hands under his shoulders and lifted him. When he was on his feet again he seemed all right, just very weak and tired, like an old man. He told me to pick up the camera again and wait with him on a bench in the cremation garden a few hundred feet away.

He and I sat there for at least a half hour. We saw no one. At one point it almost looked like Cording had fallen asleep sitting up, but no. He had just gone into a light meditative state. I smoked several cigarettes and waited for Cording to tell me what our next move was. Eventually we rose again and walked back to the grave. Cording picked up the sheet, or maybe I should call it a shroud, and then had me follow him again as he carried it away. We went past the cremation garden and into a small grove of bushes. There, Cording set the shroud on the ground one last time and unfolded it little by little until it was back to its full size. He told me to get a close shot of it.

There were actually letters on it, twelve inches high, somehow etched from the mud that had caked onto it, as if small fingers had used it as paint. The writing was very clear, though the letters were spiky and shaky. The words were *Gyora El*. That was it, nothing more. Cording stared at them for a time, seeming a little confused, but not scared, like I was. Then suddenly, he seemed much more certain about where we were to walk. He gathered up the sheet and dumped it into the nearest trash can.

From Mount Halcyon, we went down Bowler Avenue, then headed south. As we walked and I videotaped, I started to feel very deeply concerned for my own well-being. Cording stopped every quarter-mile or so and thought for a moment, trying to sense something, but always moving in more or less a straight line. Then there came a series of turns he took that exactly duplicated the way I used to walk from a Seven-Eleven to my grandfather's house. I watched in disbelief as he even veered off the sidewalk beside the house where a family called the Vheatys used to live. The giant oak tree on the edge of their front lawn was split neatly in two at the trunk, and Cording stepped onto the lawn and bisected that tree the way I used to every single time I encountered it from the age of six. He kept going without looking back, joining the sidewalk again. It was a move completely out of character for Cording and made no earthly sense at all. The moment when we reached Brian Lane was the real turning point for me, the time when I most considered dropping the camera and just running away from this awful task.

We left Brian Lane and started to walk up a long, winding path onto private property. The path led between reeds and trees starting to shower leaves onto us under the weight of the wind. I kept far back. Cording was small in the camera frame. He stopped entirely for a minute, looking around. Then he gestured for me to come closer. Breathing hard with fright, I did so. He said to me: 'It's here. Something's here. Something's here. Be very quiet.' With that, he continued to move up the dirt path, which bent slightly to the right, and which in about a hundred feet would lead directly to my grandfather's back yard.

When Grandpa's house came into view, I couldn't move any further. I said nothing. I would tell Cording where we were, and why it was so ridiculous that we should be here, only after he had completed whatever task he had in mind. I wanted to hurt him somehow, to make him feel utterly foolish. I would let him look around, and then I would explain to him that his instincts were completely wrong. I finally had a reason to abandon him. I would even keep taping so I could document his wrong turn. But deep down, I feared that something very awful had gotten too close to Grandpa's house, and that Cording had tracked it down.

Grandpa's old truck was gone, and the house was obviously empty. He had probably gone out for groceries, or to visit a friend. He still went out a couple of times a week despite his old age. After looking at the house briefly, and at the wide acreage surrounding it, which was bordered on all sides by woods, Cording turned his attention to the old horse stable my grandfather had essentially left to rot decades ago. Cording opened the rusting gate that separated the back yard from the grassy lot on which the stable sat and went through it. I followed him. It was as if he was being led by a scent or a sound that only he was able to experience.

Cording went into the horse stable, which was divided in halves, the two sides separated by a short wall. He lifted the lid of an ancient wooden storage bin and hesitantly looked inside it. There was nothing in there. Then he moved to the other side of the short wall. I saw some old furniture left sitting in the dirt for years, nothing more than a home for spiders, and then noticed, even before Cording did, a tall wooden stick rising out of the dirt to waist height, having been jammed into it, standing freely.

A small photograph had been taped to the top of the stick. It was a color photo of a young boy of about eight whom I had never seen. The boy was wearing a hooded sweatshirt and smiling at the camera as it photographed him standing in front of a movie theater. Because of the exposure to the elements, the photo had faded somewhat, but was probably no more than a few months old. I touched it as I moved the camera in to get a shot of it. I got the feeling that Cording knew right away what the stick and the photo attached to it signified. To me it was a complete mystery. The property seemed hideously silent. The silence was then broken by the sound of an engine approaching. My grandfather was coming back home. My first instinct was to walk out of the stable and greet him, but Cording reached a hand out and clasped my forearm. He put a finger to his lips to tell me to keep quiet.

It was then I realized that what he feared was not something nameless that had infested my grandfather's property, but my grandfather himself. I did as I was instructed. As my grandpa's truck got closer, the sound of the engine got louder, and Cording stepped deeper into the musty stable to keep well out of sight. Soon we could hear the truck less than a hundred feet beyond the stable, coming up the path and bumping over the grass of the back yard. Little by little, Cording crept toward the edge of the stable so that he could lean around the corner in a subtle way and watch to see what happened. I heard the sound of the engine cut off and the truck's door open. Cording took a few more steps forward and pressed his body flat against the side of the stable, hiding behind the vines that grew there. Over his shoulder, I could see my grandfather making his way up to his front door, having no idea we were there. He walked arthritically up the three steps I myself had climbed so many times before, and then he disappeared inside.

When he was gone, Cording turned to me. I remember his hair blowing crazily in the wind. He whispered that we would come back later, to see if the man had left again. He said he needed to get inside the house. We crept off the property, keeping well out of sight. That was when I told him that the man we had just seen was my grandfather. Cording looked at me with absolutely no expression. His eyes were blank, dead. He said to me, 'Then tonight you'll call him and get him out of the house, and we'll go in.'

It was about three o'clock and starting to drizzle lightly again when I was attacked. It happened in a small public overflow parking lot tucked behind a strip mall that faced Rosanda Road. I was about fifteen feet behind Cording as we crossed the lot towards it. There were about ten cars parked in the lot, and no human activity. We were near the rear entrances of a used bookstore, a laundromat, and a local hardware store that was the first business ever to set up shop in Robin Song. Cording was saying something to me, and I had to strain to listen. He was asking me if I wanted to stop somewhere and get a windbreaker or something because of the dropping temperature. I said I thought I'd be fine for a while, and then he started to ask me if there was any chance the camera could be damaged if it rained again.

Halfway through his sentence, he turned to me and kept speaking, but right away I froze, and he stopped and asked me what was wrong. Cording's eyes were taped over completely, rendering him blind. It looked like two frayed pieces of cardboard had been put over them and sealed there clumsily with several short strips of black tape. There was a thick smear of dried blood on the side of his face, almost entirely obscuring one cheek. I remember pointing at his face and being unable to form the right words to tell him what I was seeing. He put a hand to his eyes to feel the tape when something struck me hard on my right side, so hard that I and my camera went flying. My wind was knocked right out of me, and I fell to the cement. It felt like a light human body had collided with me at top running speed, and for the briefest instant, I know I felt human hair, long human hair, graze my face, and I detected the scent of perfume. The back of my hand was scraped and there was a lot of pain, but I managed to quickly grab the camera and whip it all around me, trying to pick up a physical image of what had struck me. There was nothing. When the camera caught Cording in the frame again, no more than seven or eight seconds after I'd seen him with his eyes taped, the tape was gone, and so was the blood smearing his cheek. He tried to help me to my feet, but I pushed him away.

I lay there for a few minutes, trying not to cry. Cording and I exchanged no words. I checked the camera, and it was all right. When I started to rewind the tape to watch the last minute of it, Cording assured me I would see nothing that explained what had happened. And it was true. But the camera had at least caught, incontrovertibly, the black tape on his eyes, his confused reaction to my shock, and the sound of a body slamming into mine as I lost all control of the frame and the picture went askew. The sound of the air being knocked from my lungs had been delivered directly into the microphone when the camera twisted toward my face. It had all been real. There was just no sign at all of the cause. I remembered how Cording had told me that nothing could touch me here.

For a time, Cording and I did nothing but sit on Rosanda and watch the annual autumn festival that was taking place that weekend. Robin Song's main street had been closed to traffic, and townspeople swirled all around us, smiling, laughing, doing all sorts of things. Dozens of small booths and tables were set up, selling everything from homemade jewelry to old books to ethnic food. Cording drank a cup of espresso he'd bought from a church group on the corner, and I tried to eat something. We just watched all the people who were so unaware of what sort of place they really lived in. I spotted a face I instantly recognized as I stood to stretch. Across the street was the independent movie producer whom I had shot tape for ten months before. I told Cording I would be back in a few minutes and walked over to talk to Trent.

We shook hands and I asked him if he had wound up moving to Robin Song, as had been his plan. He said that he had; his wife had been convinced by the town's charm when he'd driven her through it, and they'd bought a small house on the edge of town near the train station. I asked him if he still liked the area as much, and he said that he did. He had been trying to get some time off to take a long vacation, though, because of a problem that had arisen with his eight-year-old son.

The boy had one day developed a severe case of agoraphobia. He not only couldn't bring himself to go to school, but even going shopping with his mother or beyond the front yard made him feel afraid and sick. It had happened overnight, and he wasn't able to tell anyone what had caused it. He'd missed a week of school before he overcame his fear and went back to normal, but both his mother and father wanted him to see a therapist soon. Whether it was a real

psychological problem or just bully-related, or maybe just a reaction to something his teacher had done, they had no idea. We parted and I never saw Trent again. I wanted to tell him why I was there that day and what I had seen, but even more, I wanted to tell him that I understood what his son was going through, because the same thing had happened to me, when I was ten years old. It was something I had never revealed to anyone.

I was in fourth grade at the time. I had awoken in the middle of night to the sound of something striking my windowpane again and again. There was nothing to be seen, but the next morning I was afraid to get out of my bed. I made myself get up and walk to the bus stop, but every step I took I was afraid something was coming to get me. In school I couldn't concentrate, and when the bus let me off at the end of the day, I ran as fast as I could back to the house. For two days I told my mother I was sick with a stomach ache, but on the third day my excuses dried up and I had to go. Over the weekend it got worse and worse. I did not go out and play. I could only sleep in fits and starts. On Monday I shook when it came time to walk to the bus stop. I cried silently as the bus took me home, knowing that I would have to run hard as soon as it left me behind. Every sound made me flinch. For some bizarre reason, I could not look at animals, more specifically their eyes, the eyes of dogs, cats, even birds and squirrels. When I did, they seemed to possess a look of agonizing pain, near-death pain.

Another strange symptom of my sickness was that I became obsessed with the fact that outside of my school, every girl or woman I saw in Robin Song had straight black hair. To this day I think it was true that for a whole week there were no exceptions to this. It was as if some secret coven had appeared in my town, and though they seemed to pay no attention to me, every time I saw a female approaching me, I would see the inevitable black hair and run in another direction. I never walked anywhere that week, only ran. It was the sort of irrational terror only a child can feel, and it sunk deep into me for a time, and then, just as mysteriously, it left me. Things went back to normal.

My worst moment during my time of fear was on a snow day when school opened two hours late. A neighbor's mother drove two kids and me to school that day in a truck. When I got in the truck and saw her straight black hair, I started to cry. I swear she took no notice at all, never even glanced at me in the rear-view mirror, even as her two sons made fun of me. I said I had hurt my knee somehow. The woman was totally silent throughout the trip. I stared at the floor so as not to look out the windows and see any more black hair, just as I did when I was on the bus. When we were dropped off, the woman didn't even respond to her sons' goodbyes. She looked through the front windshield and never turned her head. I thought she was scared of me, that she knew I was aware of her secret. If I had spent one more minute in that car, I would have started to shriek and never stop.

At four o'clock, Cording and I got moving again. He said he wanted to walk around a different part of town, though he didn't seem able to cover long distances anymore. The energy had been drained from him, and his headache was worse. He flinched at the slightest noise. I told him if he wanted to look at something different, we should go across Rosanda to Marquette Street. From where we were, all we had to do was cut through a thin strand of trees to get there. We started to go through them, and I expected we would be on the other side of them in less than a minute. Instinctively I started videotaping again, as Cording wanted me to. It didn't take any

thought or effort. I merely rested the camera on my shoulder at a certain angle, no longer bothering to frame the shot through the viewfinder, or keep my eye on the miniature screen to maintain it.

Something happened. The trees kept going and going, and for a second I thought I had made a mistake, but I couldn't have. I had taken this shortcut dozens and dozens of times as a kid. I didn't remember a path leading into the woods, but there was one, and we just naturally found ourselves on it. Since I hadn't been in that spot in many years, I assumed the path had been somehow formed in the interim. But finally I called out for Cording to stop walking. He turned around and asked me what was wrong. I wasn't sure. The woods went in all directions, seeming thicker than I ever remembered. The path split them perfectly. Somehow we had gotten lost, or construction over the years had moved things, but construction only took forest away, never added it. Cording asked, 'Are the woods bigger than you thought?' I said yes, and that we should turn around. We started walking back in the other direction. After only fifty yards, the path began to bend dramatically to the right. It hadn't been curved before, not even an inch. Nothing could be seen through the trees. They marched back infinitely.

I stopped and stared at the path, my eyes wide. Cording looked at me and did not seem surprised at my confusion. He told me if the path was not what it seemed, it would do no good to try to go back the way we came. We would walk, and that was all we could do. I protested, but he only said again, 'There's nothing we can do but walk.' So we went. Every step was unnatural, surreal. The trees surrounding us were like any others, and the path was nothing more than a neatly beaten line through the grass. We could hear birds overhead, but no traffic in the distance. The wind was higher than it had been. After curving to the right, the path straightened for a time, going to the west. I remember the position of the sun, which was almost entirely hidden by the clouds. The path continued and did not veer from its westerly direction.

It stayed that way for what felt like almost a half hour before it changed in any way. I don't recall the various turns it took. They were meaningless. Cording walked with his head down, resigned. He moved at a steady pace despite the fact that his breathing was becoming ragged. If I had been alone, I would never have kept going in a relatively straight line. But Cording had the air of a man who had been through something like this before, and knew that plunging into the woods would be a mistake. The rugged terrain was constant. We were lost in the middle of a forest where no forest had ever been. It would have been impossible to walk through Robin Song at such a steady rate and not emerge onto a street, or a lawn, or anything at all. There were no signs of human inhabitation, no litter, no footprints other than ours. Time passed. The sun began to set. The thought of being trapped in the woods in the dark sent me into a panic. I would rather have died first. If the sun disappeared over the horizon, I would scream for help. I would not be able to control myself.

About forty-five minutes into the journey down the trail, something appeared around a bend. In a small grassy clearing sat a house, a single-story white house, overgrown with weeds and vines, looking decrepit and rotted. It did not take me long to recognize the house. It had once belonged to Irwin Settle, the man who had murdered his psychiatrist in 1991. This was not where his house should have been. He lived on Cottler Road. But here it was. The brown streaks of his doctor's blood were gone, but still the place was surrounded by an aura of dread and sickness. Two of the windows were boarded while the others were still exposed and open. We walked around it, checking out every angle. I'm not sure what Cording was looking for. He asked me in an almost apologetic voice to please make sure I was videotaping. Instinctively, I began to frame the shots more carefully.

Cording noticed something on the side of the house. When we got closer, we saw that it was a paper flyer, taped haphazardly to a drainpipe and forgotten. It showed a child who had gone missing from Robin Song. The paper had been posted by the state police and provided a number to call with information, as well as the date the boy had last been seen. The child's name was Daniel Katrell, age nine. The photograph was identical, absolutely identical, to the one fastened to the end of the wooden stick inside my grandfather's horse stable. Because the size of the photo was also the same, one could easily surmise that the one taped to the wooden stick had, for whatever reason, been cut carefully from one of the state police flyers.

Walking closer to the house, we could begin to see into the windows. The glass had long since been broken and removed. Standing on my toes, I could see that while the exterior of the house had gone to seed, it was true what they said about the inside: it was clean and untouched. All of Irwin Settle's possessions had of course been removed years ago, but there was no graffiti, no vandalism. The walls and floors were bare of even cobwebs. It seemed like no one had ever dared enter. I had to remind myself that this was not a real house, but the prop of some force beyond my understanding that had put it here to taunt us. But I knew somehow that the real thing was just like it.

We might have finally moved past the house and kept walking, except that toward the end of our inspection of the property, I spotted something inside one of the rooms, something taped to the wall of what was probably Irwin Settle's bedroom. The layout of the house suggested it. The dusk shadows obscured this second exhibit, and my eyes could not make out what it was. The camera failed to do so as well, no matter how I zoomed in past the windowpane and into the room. Knowing that no one, not even the police, would ever put a flyer or notice up inside the house without a deeply strange reason, I was overcome with the need to know what it was.

I got up on the air conditioning unit outside the bedroom window. Standing on it, I had to lean way over to my left, balancing myself carefully, to get close enough to the window to set one elbow on it and push the camera into the room. I got a very shaky shot of the object on the wall and then jumped down. Cording asked me what I had been looking at, and I told him it wasn't important. He was satisfied with that and gestured for me to start walking again. And I did. But when Cording thought I hit the record button to start taping again, I actually cued up the playback to see what I could see.

It took me several viewings of those last ten seconds to make anything out, so clumsy was my attempt at framing and so inexact was the focusing. Finally I pieced the image together enough to realize that what was on the wall was another missing person flyer, identical in format to the one pleading for help for the missing child, except that this one showed Forsch Cording. The photograph depicting his thin, haggard face appeared to be a still frame from the very videotape I had been shooting that afternoon. The 'last seen on' date on the flyer registered on the tape very clearly. It was the current day: October 9, 2005.

There was another fifteen to twenty minutes of walking on the trail. The sounds of animals scampering in the leaves and the leaves themselves skittering across the ground dwindled to almost nothing. The sun got low behind the trees, and then the path simply ended. We were in front of a thin screen of trees, and something could be seen through them: houses. We went through the trees and came out roughly where we had intended to go hours before. We were on Marquette Street. It was as if we had merely been displaced by a few hundred yards. It was twilight and we were both exhausted beyond words. Looking back, I saw the path was still there, waiting for us to return if we were insane enough to do it.

At the Sam and Mam Diner, we sat and drank strong coffee as night came. There in our booth in the corner, Cording downed cup after cup, eating apple pie just to get some of his strength back even though he had no appetite. He spoke for a full hour, telling me things I will never be able to forget. Once he opened his mouth, it all finally came out uninterrupted in a very calm monotone, as if he were delivering a lecture to a class of one.

He told me of a ten-year-old girl who lived in Robin Song twenty-five years ago, and of the freakish twist of fate that had befallen her to turn her into something that was less than human. He told me how his mentor had traveled across the world to Robin Song in order to kill the girl and remove her horrible influence from the town. But over the past few years, Cording had come to doubt entirely that the task had truly been completed. He believed that the girl named Gretchen Plauser had survived somehow, and had been sheltered in Robin Song since that time by people who surely knew how destructive she was. Cording told me how every act of madness, every unnatural emergence, and every corruption of reality in Robin Song was due to Plauser's presence, and how she had to be found at all costs. He needed help from people he would not tell me about, but without documentation of her effects on the town, he would not get it. He told me not just about Gretchen Plauser and Robin Song but of two other small, unnoticed areas in this world where a similar sickness had descended over people who were unaware that anything was truly wrong.

The terms he sometimes used as he spoke were foreign to me, and seemed foreign to any language I had ever been aware of. It was obvious that Cording could not rest as long as these places continued to fester. I believe the only time Cording ever spent in the United States was spent in Robin Song, two or three times a year if he had to. He was an old man with the body of someone in his thirties. He reminded me to keep to the confidentiality agreement I had signed at the beginning of the day, and that was when I knew that he might not be long for this world. If he was so deluded into thinking that I, or anyone, could possibly go to my grave without confessing the events of that day to a single person, his mind was not operating logically. I wondered how many other people he had unwittingly brought into his secrets, and how many of them had even been able to make others believe in their experiences.

I realized what I had to do to bring the night to an end, and so I did it. I used the pay phone inside the restaurant to call my grandfather. When he answered, I concocted the most plausible lie I could to get him out of the house. I asked him to drive well outside of town to rescue me from car trouble. Of course he offered to help me. When it was done, I went back to the table where Cording was waiting. He said, 'Let's go.'

With night came temperatures in the forties. We walked through the emptying streets, and passed only a single person on the way to our destination, a young girl walking her dog. We stopped only once after that, to buy a flashlight. Cording hadn't expected to be in town this late. I got the impression that its atmosphere weakened him so greatly that his body could only tolerate a limited amount of time there, like a diver needing eventually to come up for air. But where a diver could return to the surface right away, Cording needed weeks, even months, to decompress after a day in Robin Song.

I'm not exactly sure when we got to the edge of my grandfather's property, but I think it was a little before nine o'clock. We walked up the winding path that led to the house through total darkness. Cording trained the flashlight ahead of us. He did not trust fully that my grandfather had left, and so he moved with great care, trying to spot the place where the truck had been parked before we could be seen. The truck really was gone. We had the property to ourselves. As scared as I was, looking at all the trees surrounding the acreage made it even worse. They hid expanses of woods deep enough to become lost in.

I knew that my grandfather always kept his doors unlocked. In all the time I had lived with him, no one had ever entered his house unwanted. But now it was different. The front and back doors would not open. Cording pulled on them very gently, not wanting to make any sound. To ask me if there were some other way into the place, he had to get very close to me and whisper almost in my ear. I shuddered to have him almost touch me. At the back of the house there was a window into the cellar, set into the cement foundation. It was the best way in. Its lock had rusted away years before, and I thought it might just slide open. Once again we were thwarted. The lock had at some point been replaced. This time, Cording didn't hesitate. He took his shirt off and wrapped it around his foot. Then, having no other choice of action, he broke the window in with a single kick. The sound was much smaller than I thought it would be. He put his shirt back on and shivered a little in the cold. We climbed carefully down into the cellar. The window was just barely large enough for us.

When my feet touched the cement floor and I let myself drop fully in, I felt criminal and unclean. The first thing Cording did was reach back up through the window and pull the video camera down to us. The darkness was total, and he had to hold the flashlight on the camera so I could find the record button. Then he pointed the flashlight in front of us. The first thing we saw was a clothesline running diagonally across the cellar. On it hung a bed sheet and a single article of clothing, a wrinkled red t-shirt. In one corner of the room, there was a water heater and the old bureau I remembered dragging down the steps five years before.

Beside the bureau was something odd. It was a pair of shoes sitting on the cement floor, sneakers, very small ones, beaten and dirty. We moved closer to them, and I saw that they must have belonged to a child. Before I could dwell on them, Cording had moved the flashlight to the wall opposite. There, drawn in very large, blocky, chalk letters, were four words: *hantainos kric gyora el*. Cording moved the ray of the flashlight past them so quickly that he must have expected those letters to be there. Their image was in my mind one second and gone the next, burned there. It must have taken quite some time to etch them onto the cement bricks. Each letter was more than a foot high and done with great care.

Cording moved closer to the wall and trained the light on a row of index cards that had been taped there at eye level. The index cards were old and yellowed, and on each had been drawn a simple, featureless human stick figure, one per card. They were lined up in a row, six of them, beginning at the far right edge of the strange words on the cement. A card table had been set up on the side of the basement opposite where the bureau was. We stepped over to it. Now I could no longer feel the cold air outside the cellar touching my back. On top of the card table was an old cassette tape recorder. As we watched, the recording wheels moved slowly around. The sound inside the cellar was being taped, but no effort had been made to hide the recorder. Beside it was a shoebox full of cassettes. Cording lifted a couple of them up to my camera. One said 'stage one,' and another just had a date on it from a previous year. He set the tapes back in the box very gently.

When we had seen all there was to see in the cellar, there was a noise from above us. It was very distinct. It was a shifting sound, like something being moved across a floor, and then

footsteps. We froze where we were standing, both of us. We had not heard the sound of an engine, nor any door opening or closing. It would have been impossible to miss. After a moment, we heard the footsteps again, creaking in the ceiling, moving three steps and stopping. We remained perfectly still. I had begun to sweat. Finally, Cording moved toward the old wooden stairwell that led up to the first floor of the house. He put his hand on the railing and stopped, listening.

There came to us the sound of a female human voice, singing softly, in an African dialect, the elderly voice I had heard on videotape back on Cotton Branch Trail. It was muffled by distance and the floorboards above our heads, but we could hear it all the same. We listened and did not move. It sang for about thirty seconds, seeming to beckon us, and then stopped. There was only the sound of the wind outside.

Almost immediately after that, there was a different, very distinct, deep, sharp female voice from just beyond the top of the stairs, behind the closed door that separated the two floors. It said just one word in an accusing, angry voice: 'Liar!' I jerked back so severely that the camera lost its focus, and a sputtering sound of complete terror escaped my throat. Tears began to crawl down my cheeks. I had reached my breaking point and was in shock, all rational thoughts suspended. That one word was meant for Cording. I knew it.

There was nothing for a full minute. And then Cording started to climb the stairs. He got up the first three with unbearable slowness, placing his feet right in the middle of the steps so as not to make them creak. He turned to me in the dark, and whispered two words: 'Stay here.' Carrying the flashlight and leaving me behind, Cording went up the stairs. I waited and waited for more sounds of movement from above, but there were none. I started to back instinctively away from the staircase when Cording reached the top of it. He turned the flashlight off, and I could just barely see his silhouette above me. I shut down the camera and set it on the floor beside me. I'm not sure how I was conscious enough to make that decision. I heard the door opening and being pushed outward. Cording moved a few steps forward, and then he was out of sight entirely.

In my fear I moved backwards across the cellar to stand beneath the window we had come through. At least there was air and the faint sounds of the wind in the trees outside. Beneath the window was where I would wait for Cording to return. Keeping my head turned toward the stairs, I pushed my camera up and out into the grass, then stood rigid in the dark, trying not to see the faint shapes of a child's shoes on the floor, a tape recorder working strangely in the blackness, or the outlines of white chalk letters spelling out unknowable words, two of which I'd so recently seen etched on a death shroud.

What happened two minutes later as I cowered in the basement is something I can't, and won't, describe. I've used these pages to tell of what I could, but some words can't leave my fingertips because they are so hideous and so unbelievable. No human imagination could conceive of the images I saw of the terrible struggle that Cording engaged in inside my grandfather's house. I will only say that the fight came down the stairs as Cording either tried to escape or tried to lure his enemy down to a place where I might be able to help him. But I couldn't. My nerve failed me as soon as I heard the door crash open above and two sets of footsteps rush down the wooden stairs. When I caught just a glimpse of someone or something larger than Cording through the gloom, I leapt up to the window desperately and dragged myself out of the house, scraping my stomach and my arms badly in my shrieking effort to get away. When my hips got caught, I wrenched them free and felt glass rip through the waist of my jeans, tearing my flesh.

Once fully outside, I grabbed my camera off the ground. I ran toward the woods twenty yards behind my grandfather's property, the thought that those woods might mutate and change to engulf me never entering my frenzied mind. I didn't look back. I heard one last sound of something heavy, a body, slamming into a cement wall. Then I was gone, running blindly through the trees, branches cutting my face. The geography of Robin Song remained rational for me as I fled. Within three minutes I reached the road and kept running. It wasn't far to the commuter train station, which was unattended and dimly lit. I got onto a waiting train car with my return ticket and collapsed alone inside. Tears and sweat were pouring down my face. I was bleeding from dozens of small cuts, but I felt no pain.

Blessedly, the train left almost immediately, taking me far away, but just before it began to move, I caught sight of a solitary figure on the tiled platform, a woman walking along very slowly and with seemingly no thought toward boarding the train. She was holding one arm as if injured. As the rear car I was in rolled slowly past her, I saw that she had long, straight black hair. I jerked my head away from the window before she could see me. I spent the rest of that trip trying to bind my wounds with the sleeves I ripped from my shirt.

I've tried several times to write down what I think I saw in that cellar, but the words always fail me. The tapes I shot that day have stayed in a bottom drawer, unwatched. Once, I dialed Cording's phone number, but it had been disconnected. And I have not contacted my grandfather, not at all. I've begun to subscribe to Robin Song's local newspaper. Every night before I go to bed I scan it briefly to take note of the missing persons cases that spring up, and every other unusual occurrence that is written off as vandalism, weather damage, freak behavior from someone passing through from out of town, or isolated and forgettable incidents of violence.

Last week the front page carried a story that riveted Robin Song for several days. An independent film producer named Trent who had not so long ago supervised the shooting of a horror movie in Robin Song, and then moved into town with his family, stabbed his wife to death as she slept. The police found him sleeping naked in the woods. No motive for the killing could be gleaned.

trail

My name is Sean Locksley. I am twenty-three years old and in my last year of study at the University of Wisconsin. In mid-October of 2005, I noticed a small flyer inside a café advertising a Halloween carnival in Rose Creek Park three miles or so outside the Milwaukee city limits. My friends and I were looking for something to do on Halloween night, so we decided to go to the carnival for some cheap thrills. There were three of us that night: me and my friends Darcy Carew and Jack Lear. We were all pre-med students at the university. We had a few beers at my apartment on campus, and then we set out for the carnival, but we wound up not getting there until almost ten o'clock.

Some of the lights had been turned off in the park, and there weren't that many people milling around anymore. There was a haunted house for small kids, another one for more mature kids, and a haunted trail leading off into the woods. The trail was what had made me want to come to the carnival, because I knew Rose Creek Park went so far and so deep into the woods that it was guaranteed to be creepy, even though all it would certainly be was a bunch of fake tombstones and lurching zombies and vampires that leapt on cue from behind trees. But it looked like we were too late for the haunted house and the trail. We bought some cider, and no new hay trucks came along to take us down it, and no one else had gotten into line. It was about ten fifteen when one of the employees of the carnival told us it was pretty much over already, which meant Halloween itself was done. We were disappointed, but not too terribly so. We started discussing where we should go to drink. The spooky sound effects CD that had been playing over some loudspeakers stopped, and it seemed like everyone was just about gone. It was very dark in the park by then. The lights had been dimmed all over.

Just as we were about to leave for good, a horse-drawn carriage came clanking up to us from across the field in front of the woods. The carriage was driven by a tall man in a top hat. He stopped his horse and stepped down from his seat, removing his hat. The man had long, stringy hair that had thinned in several places, and he seemed about sixty years old. He smiled at us, and we saw that his face had been heavily rouged. He wore a topcoat with a white shirt underneath it, and garish bright blue pants. On his feet were old white sneakers. Nothing about the man matched. He greeted us expansively and offered us a ride down the trail, the very last of the night.

We were initially tempted, but only one of us by that time wasn't thinking more about heading off to the bar. Jack was still excited about the trail. He was twenty-one years old. He wanted to go on the trip, preferably alone, 'so he could get the maximum scare,' I remember him saying. We just laughed at him as he climbed into the back of the rickety carriage. Without asking for payment, the coachman tipped his hat at us, donned it, and got back up behind the white horse. He got the horse moving with a gentle nudge. The carriage slowly turned around toward the north and moved across the field. Jack leaned out and waved at us. He said he would meet us at Four Provinces Bar in about forty-five minutes. The carriage bumped along across the field and entered the trail that led into the woods. Then we went on our way.

An hour and a half later we were firmly ensconced at Four Provinces, and we had begun to worry a little. When two hours had passed, we left the bar and walked back to the park. By now, the area where the carnival was being staged was virtually deserted except for a few straggling workers. The next morning the haunted house and the other attractions would be removed. Darcy and I stood at the place where we had last seen our friend and saw nothing that hinted at his whereabouts. Our cellphones had no messages. We waited there for another full half hour before we returned to the bar. No sign of Jack.

We went back to the park. It was now a little past two in the morning. Everyone was gone. The area was lightless. Darcy and I walked across the open field in front of the woods and stood at the head of the haunted trail. We could see fake tombstones marching off into the darkness. We decided to walk the trail. The atmosphere as we went was more than unsettling. Rose Creek Park is not the most dangerous after-dark location in Milwaukee, but there has been plenty of crime there in the past. We walked the full half-mile of the haunted trail, past artificial spider webs strung in the trees and a row of hanged dummies dangling from ropes, which were just silhouettes in the moonlight now. We called out for Jack, but no answer came. When we came out on the other end of the trail, at a residential street called Hortis Avenue, we went right to the police. But we never saw Jack again.

The police conducted a thorough search for him, covering every inch of the trail and most of Rose Creek Park. No evidence of his presence, or of a mysterious coachman, was found. More mysterious still was the fact that the operators of the Halloween carnival claimed they had never hired any coachman with a carriage to take anyone down the ghostly trail. They operated three open hay trucks, and that was it. The coachman had been an interloper. But no one else could remember having seen him or his horse or his carriage. And no track marks suggesting a carriage ride were found along the trail.

Two months after Jack's disappearance, Darcy called me at home because something else was greatly disturbing her. Her memories of the night we lost our friend had been undergoing a slow, strange metamorphosis. Little by little, she had been losing her recollections of the mysterious coachman. In her mind, she could only see Jack insisting that he could catch the last hay truck of the night if he ran down the trail. He was saying he wanted to make a run for it because he had seen the truck get onto the trail just as the employee from the fair told us we'd missed it. Darcy now had vivid memories of Jack running across the field, a little drunkenly, intent on getting on that hay truck.

I was bewildered by this. I knew our encounter with the coachman had been real, and I thought Darcy must now be overwhelmed with grief and shock to the extent that her mind was playing tricks on her. But she swore she had all but lost her images of the coachman entirely. The picture of Jack running across the field alone was quite strong. She couldn't even really recall what story she had told the police. I figured it didn't matter anyway, because nothing would change the fact that the search for Jack was essentially over. Something terrible had happened to him; that was all that mattered. But the more I mulled over Darcy's new story, the more depressed I became.

On December 28, I walked back to Rose Creek Park, to the site of the long-vanished Halloween carnival. It was a little after 9 p.m. I looked at the field where I had last seen Jack, and I began to walk. Inside of two minutes I was at the head of what had once been the ghostly trail but was now just a pedestrian walking path leading into the woods. It had snowed two days before, and there were three inches of powder on the ground. The light refracted off the snow cover and gave me plenty of light to walk by. I didn't feel very safe, but I didn't much care about that anymore. As I walked, I could very clearly recall the fake tombstones and artificial spider webs I had seen two months before. I seemed to remember the exact location of each.

Ten minutes into my moonlight hike, I turned my head to the right, remembering this was about where Darcy and I had seen a row of four stuffed dummies hanging by their necks from the trees. I stopped, stunned, when I saw that the dummies were still there, fifteen feet or so off the trail, silhouetted eerily. They had never been taken down. A chill went through my spine. It was only twenty degrees outside, but I felt much colder than that. I stood staring at the effigies, unable to go on. It struck me that there was no snow on the fake corpses' shoulders. There should have been if they'd been hanging there for longer than two days. And even drenched in shadow, they seemed much more realistic than they had seemed before. I took a few steps off the trail to get a closer look. There was no question that these corpses were different somehow. They were not merely husks stuffed with hay and paper. They looked very much like actual dead bodies. I was about to step even closer to them when I heard the clomping of a horse's hooves on the path behind me.

I turned and saw a carriage moving my way. At that point, my mind and body locked up almost entirely to the point where a scream was impossible; running, more impossible still. I could see little bits of snow kicked up when the horse trotted forward, and when the wind rose its mane blew partially over its eyes. The coachman sitting above him was nothing but a dark shape. The

carriage came up to me and stopped. The horse turned its head toward me and then quickly looked away, disinterested. The coachman climbed down slowly from his perch. It was the man who had taken our friend away on Halloween. He was dressed exactly the same way, down to the top hat and tattered sneakers, his face heavily rouged. He turned to me and removed his top hat and invited me to go down the trail in style, in the back of the coach. There would be no charge, the man said.

I managed to speak then, just a few words. I asked the coachman where my friend Jack had gone. The coachman said he would be only too happy to show me. It was just up ahead. He half-bowed and stepped back, opening up the door of the coach. But I would not get in, of course. I was not going anywhere with that madman. Seeing my reluctance, the coachman put his hat back on his head and continued to smile kindly. He told me that if I did not wish to come voluntarily, he would make it easier to oblige.

The next memory I had was sitting in the back of that coach as the horse pulled it down the trail. There was no recollection of getting inside the coach. I was simply there, frozen with fear. I recall every detail of the trip that then began: the snow on the ground, the moon hidden by the clouds above, the way my breath plumed in front of my face, the sound patterns of the horse's hooves on the path. I saw that the mock tombstones were back. And now there were far more bodies hanging from the trees, some of them hanging from heights that seemed impossible. Once or twice as we went, I had to crane my neck upwards to see a body hanging from a branch almost a hundred feet in the air, so high up I could see no detail. Each body I saw was different. None showed any signs of carnival fakery. Some of them seemed to be children. And the tombstones themselves became more and more realistic as we went, doubling in number, then tripling, until it seemed like we were not even traveling through Rose Creek Park anymore, but rather a large wooded cemetery. The tombstones varied in size, and soon large, silent tombs appeared in the woods. I tried to read the names on the stones and tombs, but it was too dark to make out more than a few.

The thought of leaping from the carriage did not even occur to me. My mind was in an absolute fog of terror, in the same state as someone in a dream in which voluntary action is impossible. The worst moment for me before the coach stopped came when I saw the glare of distant car headlights through the trees, confirming that I really was still in Rose Creek Park and reality was only a quarter-mile away, but unreachable.

The horse eventually stopped in its tracks, and the carriage creaked as the driver stepped down. He opened the door and motioned in his sickly gallant way for me to step out. I did. We were in a large field that I did not remember from my first walk down the trail on Halloween night. This one stretched as far as the eye could see. The city wasn't there on the horizon, as it should have been. The coachman told me to take my time and get a good look. He was in no hurry, and this journey was meant only to please his customer.

What I beheld in that field was a sprawling, unthinkably massive pile of human bodies, an accumulation of corpses suggesting some sort of secret genocide. The pile rose twenty feet off the ground in places. There must have been thousands of dead bodies there. And very few of them were still intact. I could see even through the dark that there had been an effort to at least partially dismember virtually all of them. They had been hacked at, cut up. I saw stray arms and legs in the bloody snow. Just a few yards from where I stood, I saw what looked like a collection of fingers lying on the ground, grouped together with a rubber band. An empty soda bottle lay nearby.

The coachman spoke to me. He said that the city around us was a violent place, one that killed and killed and killed, and he couldn't keep up with it all. He had to chop up the bodies into bits to make room, but every night there were two or three more. The people in the city never stopped killing. Even as he said these words, his smile remained, never wavering, as if he were incapable of any other expression but that vacant grin. The coachman told me that my friend Jack had wandered off into the woods, where a junkie stabbed him many times, and tried to hide him. He said the police would find him nearby if they really looked.

The coachman lifted his right arm and pointed off to the east, then asked if he could put the body on the pile with the rest. I tried not to look at the man. I squeezed my eyes shut then, determined never to open them again. I heard the coachman's last few words: 'Goodnight, friend. Use caution in these parts, and happy Halloween.' There was the sound of the coachman getting up onto the carriage again. The horse began to move. I heard it clomping away and the carriage rattling. The sound slowly began to fade as it made its way back down the trail. In a minute or so, it was almost gone. I opened my eyes. I saw the carriage as a tiny dot moving deeper into the woods. When I turned around, there was no field in front of me. It was just the end of one of many walking trails in Rose Creek Park, the one I remembered from October 31st. I soon emerged from it and found myself just outside the city again. I sat down on a curb and wept. Eventually I found a cab to take me home.

The police found the body of Jack Lear on their own, but not until 2006, roughly where my carriage ride with the coachman had ended. Jack's body was entirely decomposed by then. Foul play was obvious. There were twelve stab wounds in his chest. There have been no more Halloween carnivals inside Rose Creek Park. My memories of the night I last saw Jack continue to this day to play out with an unexpected invitation from the coachman to take one last ride down the trail. Darcy only remembers our lost friend making a dash for a hay truck that could never be reached.

eyes

My name is Wesley Harrod. In the year 1884, when I was forty years of age, I took office in the United States Congress, representing the state of Virginia. I found myself dealing with all manner of political issues that year, large and small. One of the most minor required me to sit on an unpublicized committee whose charge it was to deal with a growing problem in some large eastern cities, namely, the fleecing of the public by spiritualists and fortune tellers. There was no regulation on such activities then, and complaints about shysters passing themselves off as mediums and psychics poured into politicians' files at a shocking rate. The problem became so great that Congress itself appointed five men to hold informal hearings on the subject. I became involved with the committee as a favor to a colleague. On one of my first vacation days from Congress, I volunteered to attend a séance with another congressman, Mr. Thomas Branch of Georgia, to see for ourselves what sort of hucksterism was being passed off in Washington.

The séance was held in a brownstone at 11th Street and C by a Mrs. Evelyn Crowdy, who charged a handful of spectators four dollars each to witness her attempt to contact the deceased wife of a man named Grantham. This was the second such event Mr. Branch and I had attended that week. He and I sat in a dark living room with three other men and watched as Mrs. Crowdy blew out every candle in the room, then took Mr. Grantham's hand to begin the ceremony. The place was black as soot. There was no light anywhere, which we had not expected. Mr. Grantham had been visibly aggrieved from the moment he entered the house, and the atmosphere was spectacularly unsettling. I was already quite angered at Mrs. Crowdy's indifference toward her guest's plight. What a cruel sham she had staged, I thought. What cheek to do this to a suffering man.

Something unusual happened that night, however. After a couple of minutes of silence, Mrs. Crowdy addressed the spirit world at length and eventually spoke directly to Grantham's wife. Crowdy invited her to make her presence known through sound. It was raining that night, and soon after Crowdy stopped speaking, all of us waiting in silence for any sort of sign from the beyond, we did hear one anomalous sound mixed in with the rain: the single sharp clanging of one metallic object against another, coming from outside the house, down below on the street. At length, Crowdy asked Mrs. Grantham's spirit to make the sound again. From the street, the sound was repeated. I formed the assumption that Mrs. Crowdy must have an assistant out on the street somewhere. My colleague Mr. Branch assumed the same thing.

Branch knew that in the almost total darkness, he could leave his chair and maneuver slightly toward the window so that he could get a good look outside without Mrs. Crowdy seeing him, so he waited for her to ask for another sound and then made his subtle move. But when the third clanging came, he could see no one out on the street. The fourth time the sound was made, it seemed to him to be emanating from the lamppost directly outside the house. He took his seat again, confused.

I temporarily stopped thinking about some deceitful swindle as Mrs. Crowdy continued to speak, for I had begun to feel physically strange, overly warm and uncomfortable. I suffered with the curious and unpleasant sensation that my skin was wet all over, yet I was not sweating. Then came something truly unsettling. While my night vision should have been virtually useless in the pitch dark, I began to make out the images of Crowdy and Grantham and the others through the blackness, fuzzily at first, but then more and more clearly. Within minutes, I could see almost everything in some detail, but utterly without color. I saw that the candles in the room were still unlit, and this seemed to prove that my mind was playing a bizarre trick on me. When I looked to my left, I saw Mr. Branch very well. My vision had become so acute that if I so desired, I could have gotten up out of my chair and walked easily to the door across the room. I saw Mrs. Crowdy's hand tighten its grip on Mr. Grantham's. Her eyes were shut in the dark, and her head was cocked back as far as was humanly possible, as if she were being forced to stare at something on the ceiling in a spot behind her. Mrs. Crowdy asked Mr. Grantham to speak to his wife.

There followed a long, sad, trembling monologue from Grantham to the woman in which he begged her to show herself in some way, to come back to him whenever she could. Because Mrs. Crowdy encouraged him to keep speaking, he went on for ten minutes. During this time, the sensation of having wet skin all over intensified for me. Then there was something else when I turned my head to the right: I saw a woman sitting in one of the chairs Mrs. Crowdy had set out for us, beside one of the other spectators. The woman, previously unnoticed, was perhaps in her twenties. She was the only one in the room other than myself with her eyes open. She seemed to be able to see in the dark as well. She turned her face to me at length, unsmiling.

At that point, I closed my eyes, wanting desperately to be away from the room. I didn't understand what was happening. Only a sudden shout caused me to open my eyes again. When I did, the woman was gone. The shout interrupted Mr. Grantham's monologue. It came from the street outside. A woman had cried 'See me!' in a harsh tone. This time, Mr. Branch did not cover his move to the window with any sort of stealth. He looked out and again saw no one. Mrs. Crowdy announced that she was going to light a candle and that her connection to the spirit world had been broken.

Even before the candle was lit, I saw that there was something wrong with the woman's eyes. The newly born flame made it clear to everyone else as well. Both her eyes had puffed up and become severely bruised during her trance. She looked as if she had been punched not just once but several times. She was almost as alarmed as the spectators were to discover it, though she tried to downplay the affliction. Then everyone saw what was most chilling, which was that Mr. Grantham bore a line of words across the front of his neck. It was Mr. Branch who pointed this out. Upon closer examination, all in the room deduced that the words had somehow been made with regular India ink. They said: *Harrod will see me forever.*

Mrs. Crowdy did not know the names of her spectators. She asked us if anyone named Harrod was in the room, and I was forced to acknowledge that this was my name. A panicked Mr. Grantham wanted to know what the message meant. I assured the man that I had no knowledge of his wife, and was a stranger in town just looking for amusement. Mrs. Crowdy told the group that she would normally try again to contact Mrs. Grantham's spirit, but that the circumstances now seemed impossible and she advised everyone to go home. On my journey from the house, the sensation of wet skin faded slowly and my vision returned to normal. Upon entering my own dark house, the place was filled with just that, pure darkness. Comparing memories the next day, Mr. Branch and I were honestly flabbergasted as to how Mrs. Crowdy had achieved her effects. I told him nothing of my personal trauma during the séance.

Mrs. Crowdy requested to see me a few days later, having discovered my true political identity. I agreed to come to her house on a Sunday afternoon. We met alone. There, her eyes still somewhat swollen, Mrs. Crowdy told me that it had not been Mrs. Grantham's spirit that tried to contact us some nights before. It had been someone else, and that someone had intended to frighten me specifically, and the spirit had been extremely powerful and vengeful. She asked if anyone, particularly any woman, had cause to antagonize me. I did not tell her that I had recognized the woman who appeared to me in the darkness. It was a woman I had known under horrible circumstances seven years before.

It had all taken place in the Washington suburb of Falls Church, when I was nothing more than a town selectman who owned a small grocery store, two years before I decided to run for higher office in 1879. One of my almost daily customers was a docile young woman named Shirley Frost. She almost never said a word to me in the six months I attended to her at the store. Then one day, she unexpectedly ventured to engage me in some shy small talk, and then asked if she could tell me something in confidence. Her husband, a man named Hugh, had become increasingly delusional and seemed to be losing his mind. She didn't know what to do. Right there in the store, she began to cry. I was completely confused, at a loss, so I only told the woman that she should talk to her family about the problem. Secretly I hoped she wouldn't return to the store again, but she kept coming back, though she once again lapsed into silence, offering only a polite hello and responding to my 'how are you' inquiries with polite detachment. But I

sensed the woman was becoming more and more troubled. Sometimes she stopped in the middle of her food requests and stared blankly into space.

One day I finally felt the obligation to ask her if her troubles had been resolved. When she began to lose control of herself again, I closed the store and ushered her to the storage room, where I asked her to tell me how bad things really were. The year before, she said, her once normal husband had begun to imagine she was conspiring against him to send him to jail for poisoning a dog that had continually run onto their property, and he sometimes accused her of hiding evidence of her plots inside graves at a nearby cemetery. He began to buy books about witchcraft—in order to foil her black magic with his own, he said. He had even attempted several spells, to no avail, of course, and when his attempts at witchcraft went awry, he locked himself inside their bedroom out of fear that his wife might kill him. Just the night before, she had served him a dinner he would not eat, claiming his books had told him that any meal prepared by her would cause his blood to boil and rot. He said she was leaving him no choice but to consider summoning a demon to protect himself. Hugh Frost had stopped working, and there was almost no money left. The doctor she had seen offered to do nothing until her husband became a danger to someone. She had no family besides a very elderly mother, and no friends.

She practically begged me to help her, claiming that I was the kindest person she knew personally. I told her that I would think of something. That was on a Friday. I mused upon the problem over the weekend, but I found myself at a loss for how to help the woman. I spoke to a doctor I knew and realized that the woman really was powerless to commit her husband to a mental hospital unless the man did something truly dangerous. When Shirley Frost came into the store on Tuesday, I told her that I just didn't know what to do, and I was sorry. She asked if it was possible that she could come to my home and stay there for just a little while—she found it unbearable to sleep in the same room as her increasingly deranged, increasingly silent husband. I couldn't agree to this; I wouldn't know what to tell my wife. So Shirley Frost left the store, visibly devastated, and she never returned.

A week went by, and my guilt and fear mounted. I decided to take Mrs. Frost's monthly grocery bill to her personally. I took her address from my files and walked a mile to her home in Arlington. When I got there, I sensed the house was empty even before I knocked on the door. When my hand struck the wood, the door creaked open halfway. When no one answered my greeting, I walked inside. I found a house emptied of almost all possessions and furniture. Mrs. Frost and her husband had vacated. I walked through the house, baffled. I saw nothing that hinted at anything sinister, and then I forced myself to descend into the dark cellar, which received only a little bit of light coming in from the open front door.

I saw something down there, large letters possibly, marked on the floor, which was nothing more than packed, smoothed dirt. But I could not make them out in the dark. I left the empty house, walked down the street to purchase a candle, and then returned. Back in the cellar, I lit the candle and held the flame as close to the floor as I could, moving it in a wide circle to slowly make out the markings etched into the dirt. Little by little, it became obvious that what I was looking at was a pentagram. Someone had tried to obscure it by kicking dirt over it, but enough of it remained to identify it. Remembering the possible significance of a pentagram from some readings at university, I backed out of the cellar quickly, deeply afraid that whoever made the design might suddenly return. I went back home, and my life resumed. I never saw nor heard from Mrs. Frost again. My real career in politics began shortly afterward.

I left the psychic Mrs. Crowdy's house in a deeply frightened state. I had told her very little about myself, and nothing about Mrs. Frost. I hoped the whole episode would just fade away. I

managed to excuse myself from any more dealings with the committee looking into fraudulent fortune tellers. After a month of unsettling feelings, unable to make peace with what I had experienced at Mrs. Crowdy's séance, I walked to her house late at night and made an appointment with her servant. Now I planned to tell her everything. My conscience was killing me.

I had refused to read any of Mrs. Crowdy's messages to me after our first talk; these had come once a week and went right into the trash bin. The essence of these messages was that I should come see her again as soon as humanly possible. When I came to Mrs. Crowdy's house at 11 p.m. on the 21st of October 1884, she told me that two séances since the one I had witnessed had been disrupted by the spirit who had tried to frighten me that first time. She asked if I was ready to tell her everything. I finally did. My relief lasted only a minute. Crowdy told me that only through another séance could she use her channeling powers to ask the spirit of Shirley Frost to stay away from me. Mrs. Frost had obviously died at some point; there was no other explanation, and now she was viciously angry with me. No spirit, Mrs. Crowdy said, had ever physically punished her as Frost's had, blackening her eyes. And it was a terrible sign, she claimed, that I had been able to see her sitting in an empty chair in the dark.

I did not want to sit for a séance. I most definitely did not believe in ghosts. All I had really wanted was to unburden myself, or so I thought. But some part of me knew the woman was not a liar. After an hour of Crowdy's pleading, I agreed to sit for just thirty minutes or so while she attempted to channel Shirley Frost's spirit. I thought that perhaps I could achieve some sort of closure just through this simple, harmless act. The candles were blown out, and Crowdy took my hand. Hers was unnaturally cold, horribly so. She informed me that I was in no danger tonight, that she would not allow certain pathways of her mind to be manipulated. I might hear and see nothing at all. The dead, she said, most often communicated their thoughts in faint images and concepts released into the channeler's mind. She would try to relate them to me. I was satisfied with this, and more than a little relieved.

The séance truly began. I kept my eyes shut tight. Soon I heard Crowdy groaning strangely, and when I asked if she was all right, she did not respond. As the minutes passed, I sensed her moving in her chair. Her breathing became audibly ragged. I did open my eyes, just for a moment. My night vision did not become unnaturally heightened as before. Although Crowdy kept her grip on my hand throughout, her hand never became warmer. In fact, it seemed to become even colder.

I endured this bizarre experience for the full half hour. At about the twenty-minute mark, something happened that terrified me. I thought I could hear a human voice, shouting as if from down multiple corridors, muffled and desperate, and I would have sworn that the voice was coming from right in front of me somehow, somewhere deep inside Mrs. Crowdy's throat. The muffled voice's cries lasted for only thirty seconds, but in those thirty seconds, I thought I might break away and run for the front door.

Thirty minutes after the séance began, Mrs. Crowdy suddenly tore her hand from mine, and I heard her chair rock back and almost topple over. She got up and lit a few candles. When I saw her face in the new gloom, I was shocked and appalled. Her eyes had again been blackened somehow. Now, too, there were dark red marks on her throat. The marks very clearly represented a large handprint, as if someone had tried to strangle the woman. When I examined the handprint more closely, it began to fade in front of my eyes like a bruise that was suddenly healing a hundred times faster than it should have.

Mrs. Crowdy told me that she had spent five full minutes in contact with the spirit of Shirley Frost. In that time, the woman I had known only briefly seven years before had sworn bloody vengeance on me. She despised me for my inaction, inaction that she believed led directly to her death. I was horrified to realize that her husband had actually killed her. But Mrs. Crowdy said that this was not strictly the case. Mrs. Frost had died only a week after her husband had suddenly moved them to Boston—but it wasn't her husband's hand that committed the murder. Mrs. Crowdy claimed that Shirley Frost was killed by a demon. This demon's name was *Tazkunil*. It had been raised by her husband. This demon had caused her unimaginable pain for two whole days. Before it died, it tore her body apart. Mrs. Crowdy told me she had been able to see the demon for a full second during her trance. The spirit of Shirley Frost had shown it to her. Seeing it, Crowdy whispered to me, was like dying.

In that one moment, I believed everything, as insane as it seemed. I asked Mrs. Crowdy what I could do to ask for Mrs. Frost's forgiveness. The woman had been so docile, so meek, I didn't understand how she could have become so powerful and cruel. Mrs. Crowdy believed there was nothing I could do. Trembling, she told me that the séance had been a terrible mistake. Having been made so physically and mentally weak during that time in the dark, she had allowed Mrs. Frost's spirit to gain too much entry into the living world. And such a spirit, which bore almost no resemblance to the person Mrs. Frost may have once been, would try to torture me in any way she could. Her anger was eternal. She had implanted these words in Mrs. Crowdy's mind, again and again: *Harrod will see me forever*. All Mrs. Crowdy could do was urge me to pray, attend church, be calm. There was nothing more she could do for me.

I lived under great stress after that night, and less than two weeks later, the affliction that would drive me to the brink of insanity struck. I beheld the image of Shirley Frost standing in the middle of Constitution Avenue one day, watching me as I spoke to a colleague. She wore the type of conservative dress she had often worn when she'd visited my store years before. When I looked directly at her face, I saw that her gaze was cold and lifeless. When I looked away, I expected the frightening image to vanish—but it didn't. As my colleague continued to speak with me, the specter of Shirley Frost appeared everywhere I looked, always the same distance away, about fifty feet. I realized that if I moved my left arm, the specter did the same. When I put a hand to my forehead, so did Shirley Frost. I was being mirrored, a mocking gesture that both enraged and terrified me. I excused myself from my conversation and began to walk back to the Capitol building. When I did, the specter did the same, walking with her back to me, taking the same steps, walking down the same hallways.

I did not know it then, but from that moment on, I would see Shirley Frost in my field of vision for the rest of my days. The mirroring continued day and night, even when I was in my home. Sitting in my living room, I saw the specter in the corner. When I ate my dinner accompanied by my wife, I could see in my peripheral vision the specter putting food into her mouth as well. There were times when the mirroring stopped, but Shirley Frost never went away as long as my eyes were open. She was never more than fifty feet or so away from me. She stood in the corner of my bedroom. She sat in the corner of my office in the Capitol building, sometimes mimicking the shuffling of papers or the signing of a document. She never spoke. Her facial expression was always the same. I soon stopped looking directly at her, for to look at her face was to bring myself closer and closer to suicide. When I realized that the specter was permanent, I consulted doctor after doctor about it, but nothing they tried worked for me. I was forced to tell my wife the entire story. She remained by my side to help me.

My record as a congressman became marked by absenteeism and extended medical leaves. I resigned my post six months before completing my first term, telling my constituents that my eyesight was rapidly failing and I would soon be blind. I quickly disappeared from public life. Even before that, my friends and colleagues never saw me without dark glasses on. I told them that a congenital problem had taken my eyesight. The truth was that only when I was banished to total darkness did the image of Shirley Frost leave me be. I was safe with my eyes closed.

One year and eleven months after leaving office, I embarked upon a secret trip to Boston in order to visit the grave of Shirley Frost. I knelt there and begged for her forgiveness, my eyes shut tight so that I would not see her image mirroring me in the cemetery. Afterwards, I went to a nearby pub for a drink, and entering the dim bathroom, I removed my dark glasses and took a few minutes, as I did each day, to see. In the mirror I was confronted with the fact that my eyes had mysteriously become bruised and puffy, as if struck. I then saw the image of Shirley Frost standing almost directly behind me, closer than she had ever come. She was less than three feet from me. In very confined spaces she had always still appeared to be some distance away. But not now. What's more, she had changed. Her once sadly pretty face was a dark and sickly gray, her eyes were clouded with cataracts, and for the first time, her mouth was severely bloodied. There was a long gash on her neck more than an inch deep. Patches of her hair appeared to have been ripped from her head, leaving wounds. It was as if she had been attacked by an animal.

When I saw her I screamed and ran out of the bathroom. I bolted through the patrons of the pub and I kept going. I knew there could be no life for me then. In another pub, I drank myself into a stupor. Sometime after midnight, my drunken ramblings took me to a back-alley tattoo artist, to whom I crazily offered one hundred dollars if he could refer me to a medical man who would sew my eyelids permanently shut. I was ejected onto the street again, wanting only to die. The solution to my agony was found in a bottle of vodka, which I first emptied into my throat and then broke over a park bench. It was in that park, just before dawn, that I blinded myself with a shard of jagged glass.

I awoke in a hospital bed a ruined man, but a free one. Thus, the past nine years of my life have been utterly without sight, but I have not seen Shirley Frost again. If the woman has any mercy in her soul, she will appear just once even inside my useless eyes so that the shock of being so close to her will carry me away from this world. But I fear this is not to be. She has won her vengeance, and I will die a broken man. Let the annals of political history write that Wesley Harrod was a fair and just public servant, and make no mention of the sickness that removed me from office and destroyed my soul. And let me be buried not in Washington but in the Boston cemetery where Shirley Frost lies, in a last attempt to atone for a sin I never meant to commit.

army

My name is Salamon Tal. On the twenty-seventh moon of the Year of the Shining Cloud, I awoke in our encampment with a terrible feeling. For five days we'd been without motion in any direction, waiting, waiting for the knights to give us the order to move east, but it hadn't come. And so our days had been spent sharpening our pikes, shaving our arrow points, and at night there were songs and stories as we hoped and prayed a miracle would come for us. But that morning, which was gray and foggy, I sensed a stirring among the men, and one by one they woke up, and we could see fire on the horizon, and then here they came: a thousand men, marching and on horseback, and when I saw them come over the hill I put my head in my hands and told myself that I was not certainly dead, I couldn't know that this was the end. But every man in camp despaired, especially when we saw that more and more armies joined the first, until in the end there were thousands spread out around us and we had to move from Red Rael because there was no room in its fields for us all.

The armies carried themselves with dignity, but the fear was etched in their faces, even on the faces of the knights. Preparations were begun to march; orders were shouted and we were aligned in columns. It took hours. All fires were crushed; the wagons were loaded with supplies, the tents struck down. Harrek, my only friend, who I now clung to for his bravery so I wouldn't go mad, told me he guessed our journey overland would only be of a single day. This he said he could tell by the amount of supplies left behind for the wolves. One day. That meant we were all headed for the shore, and though we were not permitted to inquire about our destination, and no one was telling us anything, our fates were sealed.

We started to move at midday, more than four thousand soldiers, moving through the mud. The fog did not let up. Word came through the ranks that more than a dozen men had not moved from camp; they'd simply stayed and asked to be executed. Rumor held that their wishes had been quickly granted. Shtieg, a pikeman, told me he had seen it happen. There had been humor even when marching toward battle at the Cliffs of Shand, but now there was none, for not a single man believed he would live through what we were to face.

The knights were excessively harsh when a man fell out of line or a wagon was slowed. They tolerated no speech that they could hear. They barked and shouted orders, and we followed them, our heads down. Toward the beginning of dusk, I heard a man sobbing to my left, and I turned and I saw a young spearman who had broken down, yet his step did not slow. And I saw a man who walked forward even as his face had turned a sickly white, gazing forward with eyes as dead as any I had ever seen. It was as if he had accepted his fate so readily that he was willing himself to become a zombie.

At night, when we expected to rest, we did not rest. Torches were lit and we entered the Includ Forest. We could see figures, human figures watching us at a safe distance. These were the woods people, but they may as well have been the angels of death. Later I would see a man and a woman standing close enough that I could make out their faces by the light of a torch. They had faces like stone idols, without emotion or sympathy. There was no food for us. We walked all night through the cold. What did the knights care, after all, if we were starved. I heard men fall, but I didn't look back. By dawn of the next day, I was almost delirious with exhaustion. Just as light came, the order came down for us to slow our movement. We had broken through the

woods an hour before, and a quarter of an hour after that, the knights suddenly galloped ahead, and we saw the sea.

Eight great warships waited for us. We ceased movement and then began the process of loading the armies onto them. It was more waiting, but now at least we were allowed to rest, and soup came down the lines, and bread, just enough to keep us conscious. The knights sent guards through with assignments, and the armies began to separate from each other. There would be sleep on board, we were told. More than anything, I did not want to be separated from Harrek. I stayed close to him. He cursed the disorganization of the knights under his breath. Something was wrong with him. He clutched his stomach as he spoke.

It took more than two hours of interminable shuffling and shifting to get us onto the boats. It was far colder than it had been the day before. The knights didn't even care about the low murmur that went through the armies. We could see when we got close to them that even though they had been on horseback and not nearly as punished physically, they too were red-eyed and scared. We moved inch by inch across the gangplank, sometimes stopping, and I was less than twenty yards from the mouth of the gateway when something thudded beside me. I looked down and a man had collapsed almost at my feet.

It was Harrek. I reached down and so did the man beside me. Harrek's face was locked in a scream, but no sound emerged. He lay on his side, not moving. A guard came through and hovered over him and then pushed me out of the way as I shook Harrek desperately. 'He's died,' the guard said, very softly. 'He's died.' It hadn't been an ordinary death. His face told us so. It had been fear. The guard and one of the knights stayed with Harrek while urging us to move. It was Shtieg who kept me from collapsing myself, pushing me on. He and I both cried then; we were no longer ashamed, and we weren't the only ones. I looked back and saw Harrek being carried back to shore, and he disappeared from my view, blotted out by the soldiers all around me.

On the ship, I lay sprawled across the wooden supports, able to sleep only fitfully. More meaningless hours went by as we waited for the boat to leave the shore. It would be the last time we would ever touch our homeland. The men took their places, and we were left alone, the knights and guards collecting up on the deck to begin their planning. This would not be a mere attack; it would be an invasion. There were no more warships to come. Every available man had been called to fight the enemy. Without our overseers watching, there was more talk and counsel delivered to the weakest of us even as most passed out with exhaustion. I remained almost silent. There was more stirring when the cooks came through with more soup and even meat and sugared tea.

That night I sometimes heard a splash, which I would learn at dawn had been the sound of men throwing themselves from the brig. The freezing water represented a most merciful death. I was aware of four of these suicides. These men were unobstructed in their goal. I saw in the middle of the night a longswordman of my acquaintance staring silently through one of the portholes, and I made my way over to him, desperate for human contact, even if it was utterly wordless. He and I exchanged a glance and nothing more.

Our ship was on the far left of the formation of the fleet, and all I could see at first was the open ocean. Within minutes, though, I saw a shape out there on the water, a vessel sailing in the opposite direction, toward Red Rael. It was a great carrick. The longswordman, seeing it in real detail before I could, invoked the gods in a bloodless whisper. For there was no one on that ship. It drifted without aim across the water, pushed off from somewhere miles and miles away, and our own boat was now turning away from it, toward the north, in an effort to avoid striking

it. It passed close enough that we could hear the creaking of its masts. This invaluable vessel had no crew, no captain, no armies. They had been left on Alberiag to die, and none had returned. This was the ship whose soldiers we had been waiting for in the encampment back in Orain. When it had never come, the decision had been made to merge as many armies as possible and mount the invasion. I could feel men behind us peering out into the night, watching the boat move past on its way to its natural end. It transported not even the bodies of the dead.

Shortly after the sun rose, I saw that its color was not as it should have been. There was a faint yellow tinge in the sky, and upon seeing this, one of the Caelich soldiers began to wail and cry out for the gods to sink our ship in mercy. The rest of us, almost to a man, lapsed into a hypnotized silence as we watched the yellow color become more and more intense until we were sailing into a surreal blanket of warm gold, a thick fog of color that drenched every ship. To hold one's hand in front of one's face was to see it lightly bathed in that sickening hue that we had only heard rumor about.

Some began to speak of mutiny and desertion, of seizing control of the ship. But soon enough the guards came down from above, and Sir Rodric then appeared in the hold, and the first thing he said to us was 'We are landing on Alberiag.' He went on to say that we could, if we wished, write to our loved ones, and our messages would be held on board for the ship's return trip to Red Rael. Two guards began to pass out parchment and ink. Sir Rodric began to instruct us then, explaining in the driest terms the procedures we were to follow upon disembarking, procedures that we had to follow to absolute precision to save seconds. It would be only a march of two miles to our attack point. The ship would touch the shore of Alberiag in less than six hours. He spoke further of divisional assignments and said there would be no rear guard, no man left on the beach.

For four of those six hours, the idiot cleric Kristid led us in a mass that he pushed ever onward, his voice becoming hoarse, having to stop for water dozens of times as he spoke every word he could from the Book of the Star. Finally he could simply speak no more. For the last two hours before we landed, men lay on their planks staring at the ceiling above them, or they paced back and forth, muttering to themselves, or sat with heads in hands, or like me, prayed. The sky above the sea was drenched in a thick amber glow as if the sun had caught fire and was dying. Sometimes the sky would seem to flicker as if lightning were trying to press through from another realm. Night and day had no meaning here, as since the summer of the previous year, that sky had remained constant over Alberiag through every hour.

Sixty minutes out from shore, we began to hear a sound we'd never known existed. There had been no tales of it. One had to listen close in the beginning to hear it over the waves. It was the sound of a thousand, perhaps ten thousand creatures; not humans, more like animals, baying animals who had congregated and were now emitting a common cry of excitement and anger. It rose slowly all around us, and by the time land came into view to the north, every man was hearing it, and every man, including Sir Rodric, had gone quiet, listening to this awful cacophony, which was constant and unyielding.

We began to see through the amber cloak the features of the undefended shore, which seemed so much like our own back home. Sir Rodric commanded us to begin to maneuver into the optimum position for a swift disembarkation, which meant pressing against each other near the keel. Four lancers began to frantically ready the gangplank for opening. We wedged in so tight against each other that it was difficult to breathe. We had to hope that the steersman would not cause such an abrupt landing that the contact would crush the men in the first ranks. My breath came shorter and shorter as we heard the bottom of the boat scrape the shoals, and

then we had landed. A messenger lad shouted out, and the gangway began to lower, allowing that diseased light to flood in.

No one hesitated to exit the hold that had held us captive, even though the sound of that cloud of dissenting, angry voices became much louder when the cold air struck us. We lined up on the shore, having very little room to maneuver, shoved this way and that by the momentum of whichever soldier moved to one's left and right. The horses, the dogs, and the weapons were offloaded from one of the ships with great speed. It was obvious to me that things were moving much more swiftly than had been planned; the knights must have sensed the new panic among us that the mysterious outcry was causing.

When all men were off the boats, the lines that formed in order to move quickly toward the weapons caches came together fast. The knights had to shout louder and louder to get their words through to us, and many of the men seemed to have stopped responding, their movements becoming as slurred as their speech when drunk. I was handed a halberd and immediately was urged to start to march. As for sticking to the formations described to us on the ship, this plan seemed to have been abandoned. We were to simply go forward as quickly as we could. The soldiers began to march.

I knew no one anymore; the faces were all unfamiliar. We reached grass. A wide field was stretching away from us, but the grass was dead and withered. The tumult of buzzing voices was getting louder and louder, coming from just up ahead. Now a man on my left dropped his blade, and when he reached down for it, he stayed on his knees and then curled on the cold ground as if wishing to sleep, like a little boy, and no one stopped for him. Another man dropped to the ground, having lost his footing, and he made a half-attempt to rise, but from the despair etched on his face I knew he would not get up again, and his eyes closed and he collapsed right there, like a doll. The knights were shouting orders over the din to stop for nothing when we were engaged. The healers had all been issued weapons as well, so there would be no medicines or treatments for the fallen. On a certain call they abandoned their horses, leaping from them, and raised their blades, and at the top of the hill their shouts became full-throated, red-faced cries, their sound utterly lost beneath the enemy's. Now our visibility had been cut to just a few hundred yards with the intensity of the amber fog.

Over the hill, just up ahead, was the fissure, a crack in the earth more than a mile wide, with a mouth twenty feet high. Inside it, utter darkness. Now torches were rapidly lit all around, including mine, as a boy of no more than fourteen anointed my free hand with fire. I was out in front; I would be among the first hundred men in, even in front of the mercenary ranks. The cry was put forth to run, and the knights, the bravest among us, not hesitating from their duty to lead the charge, began to rush toward the fissure. I ran. The footing beneath me was firm. I could see, reflected off the roof of the fissure, a flicker of light, then another and another, which meant the enemy was emerging with their own burning torches.

We entered that terrible pit as one rampaging, undisciplined mass. I cannot say where the divide truly was between earth and hell. But as soon as my voice gave out and my eardrums began to shake with the force of the enemy's echoing, collective scream, a face appeared in the darkness, the face of a being that was not meant for even a single step outside the fissure. It had once been a man, or something's imagining of one, but there was no clothing on its body, and its bones were only half-protected by human flesh. A skeletal beast it was, two feet taller than I, having no eyes and an enormous skull that was hideously bovine. It had not hands but claws, a filthy sword gripped in one, a torch gripped in the other, and its jaws opened and closed many times in a single second, like a machine come to life, and before I could even raise my own weapon to strike it, Satan's thousands upon thousands of like-bodied atrocities became visible

far beyond this one in the rank and fetid shadows as their torches broke the darkness, and their counter-invasion began.

tunnel

My name is Samuel Pollenby. I am a teacher of the deaf in Washington, D.C. I am forty-six years old. I have had a good life and will always count my blessings. But four weeks ago, I experienced an awful trauma brought on by nothing more than seeing a certain classified ad in *The Washington Post* of November 5. Since then, I have been fighting depression and insomnia as I try to let go of one single hour nearly twenty years in the past. The classified ad that drew me back through the years was a call for anyone who had been riding on the metro rail system on the night of April 12, 1988, between 11:00 p.m. and midnight and witnessed 'anything strange' to meet at the Petworth Library on Kansas Avenue in the city on a Wednesday night. The ad did not mention any specific incident or accident, as was usually the custom in the *Post* when people posted ads looking for witnesses to testify in court. More unusual still was that the person who placed the ad was looking for witnesses to remember a night twenty years in the past.

After three days of deliberation, I gathered my resolve and showed up at the library on the appointed night. I found two people sitting in a small community room. Even though seventeen years had passed since I first saw them, and I was only in their company back then for one hour, I recognized them instantly. Ellen Vinterberg, who lived in Old Town, Alexandria, was now forty-nine years old. She was the one who had placed the ad and summoned fellow metro riders with long memories. She had set up the meeting only after a year's worth of sudden awful dreams had almost proven to her beyond a doubt that what she had seen within the metro system on the night of April 12, 1988, had not been an illusion. She needed other people to confirm it. She'd been able to bury that night in her subconscious for almost two decades, but then, during a brief power failure inside a metro station the previous February, it had all come back to her. As it turned out, the only two people who had been in her train car in 1988 managed to come to the meeting. Donna Miller was the name of the other woman who'd been on the train, which had been moving north along the red line late at night. We sat in the library and dredged up our memories until the library closed, and then we went our separate ways once again. I will never see them again, and that's all right.

The thing to keep in mind as I write this down for whoever will read it is that April 12, 1988, precisely marked the fourteenth anniversary of a trench collapse that killed four metro rail workers in 1974. Few people remember it. It happened during the construction of the red line, nearly two years before the system officially opened. The cave-in occurred between Judiciary Square and Union Station during heavy rains in early spring of that year. These rains caused unexpected flooding and a weakening of supports in the half-excavated tunnels below Washington's surface. A trench buckled in, and four workers laying tracks were instantly

buried. It took twelve hours to recover their bodies, and construction was shut down for nine days.

I was sixteen years old when this happened, and thirty in 1988. On April 12 of that year, I walked with a friend from Adams Morgan to a birthday party at about 10 p.m., and walking past St. Margaret's Church on T Street, we saw there were a few people with candles standing in a circle on the steps, and my friend had to tell me it was the anniversary of the metro cave-in, and that maybe we were seeing the families of the workers who had died. He'd seen them gather on that day twice before. I thought of how sad that was, that these people were still doing this after so many years.

I came back from the party alone, and I had to run to get the last train of the night. I just barely caught it. I had maybe one drink at the party, just to be social, and I think that the alcohol was probably completely gone from my system by the time I got on the train. There were two other people in my car, both of them women. I started to nod off a little bit as soon as we pulled out of Dupont Circle Station. But I was pretty aware of everything that was going on.

The train started to have trouble somewhere around Metro Center. Just stopping and starting, the usual thing. The lights flickered as we pulled into Judiciary Square. But that wasn't strange either. We hit the big problem about a minute after we left that station. The train stopped and it just sat there. There wasn't any announcement about it at all, and after five minutes or so, I think we were kind of expecting one. We were in a tunnel, and usually they at least made people feel a little better about things by coming over the P.A. system and apologizing and saying we'd be moving shortly, but there wasn't even any of that.

At about the ten-minute mark, the woman at the farthest end of the car from me got up and started pacing and shaking her head. She seemed really nervous. I didn't blame her. I'd never been on a stopped train that long before. I was completely awake by then, because of anger mostly. The woman's pacing covered more and more area, until she was doing almost the whole car. She looked at me at one point and said, 'I'm kind of claustrophobic.' I just nodded and said something useless. Maybe thirty seconds after she said that to me, the lights went out. She let out a little shriek. The emergency lights stayed on, at least, but now it was bad. The lights were out and we were in a tunnel, and no one was telling us anything. I could sort of see the train car in front of us through the connecting door on the far end, and their lights were out too; it wasn't just us. There weren't many people in that one either that I could see. The pacing woman tried to sit down, but she just couldn't. She finally pressed the button to speak to the conductor, but all she got was a little bit of static. It wasn't working. And I thought, This is now as bad as it can get. We were underground, in a tunnel, cut off.

When the emergency lights went out, I admit I almost panicked myself. Suddenly there was a click and we were in total darkness. I got a really bad jolt of adrenalin through me. The woman cried out again, and I yelled out, 'It's okay, it's okay!' But it certainly wasn't. It was ridiculous. I was truly scared. The other woman in the car, the one who had stayed seated and tried to read her book, said, 'What is this?' I just said I didn't know. The pacing woman said, 'Oh God, oh God, we're stuck here, we're stuck here.' Then she yelled out for someone to say something, just keep saying something. You couldn't see anything at all; it was total darkness, as if our eyes had been shut tight. So I started a little patter, something meaningless, and I got up and walked toward where I thought she was.

She was so scared that she sensed my voice getting near and said, 'Get back, please!' as if she thought I was going to attack her. The other woman told her it was all fine, that we were very close to Union Station and the worst that could happen was that we could walk to it using the

lights inside the tunnel. But even that wasn't really true, I don't think. I didn't see any lights at all. It was like being in a closet, or a tomb. Just darkness. Years before I had gone on a tour of some underground caves out near Boonsboro, and the guide shut off his flashlight for a minute and let it all sink in, how deep we were in the earth, and this was like that. You just can't take it for very long.

We tried to get a little conversation going. We stopped when we saw some weak lights come on outside the car. But this was the first bizarre thing, truly bizarre. Emergency lights had come on inside a car behind us—but I knew for an absolute fact that we were the last car in the chain because I always, always got on the last car, since it was always the quietest. And when the lights had first begun to flicker, I recall distinctly looking back through the rear window at the tunnel disappearing behind us. But now somehow there was a car chained to our rear, and its emergency lights were on. I still couldn't see much of anything because those lights were dim, and they had no real color either. I got up from where I was, which was a seat in the middle of the car, and I navigated my way toward the back. I told the pacing woman that she should come back too because the light would make her feel better, and if she wanted we could even open the door and cross into that car. But she said no.

I saw many more details of the car behind us as I got closer. It was all wrong. Instead of being filled with seats like our car, it was like a freight car, filled with what looked like dirt, literally filled with dirt all the way back, and if you were standing in that car, the dirt would have come up to your chest. But there were poles in it, and signs and advertisements, just like in any normal car. The seats had just been buried completely. It was the most insane thing I had ever seen. I thought I was hallucinating. Then I heard the pacing woman far behind me. She was saying, 'What's wrong with that car? What's wrong with that car?' in a very panicky voice. I said everything was fine. I don't know what I meant. It was just something to say.

I pressed my face as close to the rear door of our car as I could, against the window looking back. My mind was completely spinning. I was terrified. There was no way I could be seeing what I was seeing. Then a little bit of movement caught my eye, and I saw that inside that car half full of dirt, more dirt was actually sifting down from its ceiling onto the accumulation, sifting down from two different spots inside that car. If the pacing woman had seen that, she would have panicked, so I didn't say anything. I heard her say that she was going to close her eyes and lie down on the floor, and I called back to her; I said that was a good idea. The other woman said nothing. I wasn't even sure where she was. It was unmistakable that dirt was sifting down in two controlled little sheets from the ceiling of the car behind us. I kept looking, trying to make things out.

That was when the lights came on full blast in that car. They stayed that way for maybe eight or nine seconds, tops. But in that time, I saw things sticking out of the dirt. One of them was a hand, a human hand, buried up to the wrist. The other thing I saw, I swear to it, was a man's head and half of one of his shoulders. His head was turned away from me, cocked to one side as if he were listening to something in the dirt. On top of the head was a white construction helmet. It didn't move. I want to say there was blood on the man's neck, but I can't be sure there was. I just knew he was dead.

Just before the lights in that car went out for good, the pacing woman screamed behind me, maybe fifteen feet behind me. She hadn't lain down after all; she had decided to creep through the dark to see the car behind us for herself, and she saw what I saw. Her screaming hadn't really even stopped when the lights in our car came on, while at the exact same moment, the lights in the one behind us went off entirely. I stood up and saw the woman's eyes, totally wide, her hand clamped over her mouth. The other woman had stood up too and was well behind her.

Both of them were looking over my shoulder. Our car jerked a little and it started moving. I almost fell and grabbed the pole closest to me, and then I looked behind us again. Through the windows, you could just see tunnel. There was no car there connected to ours. There never had been.

We started moving at full speed, and in about two minutes we were at Union Station. I remember one man got on there. He walked past the three of us and took a seat. He had no idea what had happened. The three of us were all sitting kind of close together then, looking at each other. The panicky pacing woman—who I would know later as Ellen Vinterberg—got off at Union Station, though it was obvious that wasn't where she was headed. She just had to get off the train. I didn't know whether to follow her. She still had her hand over her mouth, and she had started to cry when she bolted out the door. She walked quickly toward the station exit. Her head was down.

That left just me and the other woman, whose name I now know was Donna Miller. As the train pulled away from Union Station, she asked me, 'Did you see the hand?' And I nodded. We just sat there for two more stops. We didn't say anything at all. Finally when Rhode Island Avenue came up, she stood up, getting ready to go. She said to me, 'I don't want to think about it. Maybe tomorrow. But not now.' I didn't know what to say. She got off the train, and I was basically alone. I got up and walked to the front of the car, where there were a couple of other people, and I sat there near them. Even so, I got off at Takoma Park, two stops too soon, and I left the station and got a cab home. I didn't sleep at all.

Since the meeting at the library, where all of us visibly trembled remembering what we had seen on the night of the anniversary of the trench collapse, I have dreams about it constantly. The dreams end in all sorts of different ways, but usually the car that the three of us are in starts to crack at the ceiling and dirt comes sifting through, and we beat at the windows until we can't breathe anymore. I feel myself getting covered by dirt, and I hear it bouncing off a construction helmet I'm wearing. I keep trying to scream, but my mouth fills up. Sometimes in the dreams I know I'm about to suffocate, and I reach a hand up to grab anything I can, and I know that my hand will be frozen like that after I die, clasping above the dirt.

Ellen Vinterberg, who had been most affected by what we saw, died last night. She had apparently been severely depressed for months, though no one but myself and Donna Miller truly understood why. She committed suicide by jumping in front of an underground metro train halfway between Judiciary Square and Union Station at about 10 p.m. The *Post* says it is the only known case of a person who was not a metro employee dying inside the train tunnels. To get to where her body was found, she would have to have either stepped out the rear door of a stopped train car and climbed down to the tracks unseen, or walked through the dark from either station until she was fatally struck. The same fate will not happen to me; I am sure of it. Though the dreams of the metro continue to possess me, I am stronger than she was. After all, it was I who went forward to see what was inside that other train car while she cowered in the dark. I will be as brave as I can be, and from now on I will avoid the subway system as long as it takes to bury the past for good.

rehearsal

My name is Justin Thurmond. I have been a professional stage actor for fifty-one years. Now that my doctor has informed me that I will most likely not live to see my seventy-second birthday, I feel it is time to write of an incident that has haunted me for two decades. I have told no one, not even my beloved wife, of what I witnessed inside Ford's Theater in Washington on the 10th of April 1865. I am of sound mind as I write this, as my colleagues and relatives can attest. On the day in question, the theater troupe I was temporarily associated with was running through a dress rehearsal of *Our American Cousin*, which would be performed at Ford's Theater for President Lincoln four nights later. I recall standing with the director of the play and three fellow actors, re-blocking a scene on the stage. It came to pass that I noticed someone watching us work, someone who was sitting in a balcony box above us toward the back of the theater. I could not see the man very well, and though I said nothing, I felt uncomfortable with someone watching. No one was supposed to be inside Ford's Theater that day who was not actually involved with the company. Eventually I was able to turn my attention away from the trespasser.

About fifteen minutes later, however, that same gentleman appeared walking across the front of the house, and this really was a distraction. The man was rather short, and completely bald, but very well dressed. The first thing I and the others on stage noticed was that the man seemed very, very pale. He was staring straight ahead and moving with a strange slowness. The play's director asked the man if we could be of some assistance. The man turned slowly towards us with great effort and seemed to shake his head in a subtle way, then continued moving until he exited the house on the other side of the theater. Irritated but satisfied that there would be no further interruptions, we continued our work. Just three minutes later, one of our actors, a most excellent performer named Royce Palmer, came out onto the stage from the wings, telling of a gentleman who had just wandered into the dressing rooms and seemed in need of help. I myself followed Mr. Palmer backstage while the others waited.

The pale, somnolent man we had seen before was sitting in a chair before a large mirror, staring vacantly into space, seeming quite sick. He looked up at me, and I saw that there was a little bit of blood on his expensive shirt collar. The man said softly, 'My head hurts. My head hurts.' He brought a hand to the back of his head as if it ached greatly. Mr. Palmer retreated from the room to go summon a doctor. At this point I moved forward to attend to the man. But the stranger actually flinched back as I approached. He then said just one more thing, in what was almost a whisper: 'You'll find him in the barn.' I asked the man to repeat this, but he would not. Greatly unsettled by this encounter, I quickly left the room as well. I wish I could say that my discomfort at being alone with a sick and disoriented man was the only thing that sent me away. But in reality, my eyes beheld something in that room that I have been afraid to speak of since 1865, both for fear I might be judged insane and in terror that I might somehow relive the experience.

Before I took my leave of the mysterious stranger, his hands lay in his lap, unseen, for a brief moment, and then he brought them up to my attention again only after his utterance about 'the barn.' His hands, much more so than his collar, had inexplicably become streaked with blood to such an awful extent that no flesh could even be discerned, and they held an object carefully upon them which he lifted higher than I might see it clearly. I cannot say other than that it was a human brain, naked and coated with blood as if it had been torn from a man that very moment. Upon seeing this, I turned and rushed out, my voice strangled in my throat. I could not help it. Illusion or reality, I was repulsed as I have never been before. When Mr. Palmer and I returned to the dressing room, the afflicted stranger was gone. It was as if he had never been. As I lay

sleepless that night, I wondered what sort of phantasm had chosen to nest inside me, and what caused it—overwork, worry, or something more. I was in a daze until dawn.

Four nights later, I was on the stage performing in *Our American Cousin* when John Wilkes Booth shot President Abraham Lincoln in the back of the head in the upper box where the sickly stranger had first been seen. When Booth leapt onto the stage after his deed, I was just ten feet away from him. Booth was found twelve days later inside a barn in Virginia and shot to death. The man whom I and others in the theater company saw before the assassination was not some spiritual doppelganger of Lincoln; he looked nothing like the President. But the stranger's look, his behavior, and the freakish apparition he demonstrated for me hint that the man perhaps was never truly alive.

Looking deeper into history, one can discover, as I have done, that on April 2nd, 1865, eight days before our company at Ford's Theater was visited by someone who first sat in what would be Abraham Lincoln's fatal box and then made his way into one of the dressing rooms, a short, bald man also involved in politics was shot in the back of the head and died ten hours later. His name was William Gareth Culp, and he had been elected mayor of Manchester, Ohio, the year before. His assassin was an embittered ex-business partner who entered Culp's office late at night, talked to him for the better part of two hours, then calmly stepped around his desk and shot him. I cannot say that Mr. Lincoln's death was somehow foretold, and foretold in my presence. But I cannot say otherwise. I only pray the memory of that day leaves my soul forever when I depart shortly from this world.

lighthouse

My name is Alaric Tell. On November 5th of this year, I attended a dinner party with some fellow historians from Hofstra University and returned to my home just before 11 p.m. My small farmhouse deep in the countryside was covered in winter wrens, hundreds of them, watching me silently. That was how I knew my enemy was issuing a call to combat, a call I was obliged by tradition to obey. At the age of fifty-seven, I was fortunate to have lived long enough to be ready. I looked fondly at the house I'd dwelled and studied in for a decade and drove away from it without going inside. The wrens, upon seeing me leave, flew up into the night sky en masse, having played their part, unknowingly delivering a message they could not comprehend.

I drove eighty-four miles to a small private estate in Noyack. I parked my car in front of a tasteful but long-abandoned house set on seven acres of woodland. I took an electric lantern from the trunk of the car and walked around to the back of the property, and then down the grassy slope to a tiny strip of beach, bracing myself against the cold wind. Two rowboats were tied to a very short pier, tapping against each other as they bobbed up and down. I carefully climbed into one of them and unhooked the rope that held it in place. It was approximately a forty-five-minute journey to my family's island across Little Paconic Bay. I had to stop rowing several times to warm my hands and my ears however I could.

The silhouette of the aged lighthouse where I would do battle became visible against the stars halfway there. It was taller than I remembered; I had not seen it since I was a child of twelve and my father had told me of its significance late on the day after Christmas as we stood on our little beach, looking off toward the island I was now visiting for the first time in my life. Once a year or so as an adult I came to the estate merely to ensure that the house, grounds, and most importantly, those two rowboats were being maintained. Sometimes I would look toward the island in an attempt to see the place where my life would likely end, but not often.

The lighthouse stood a few hundred yards off the beach where I dragged the rowboat onto the sand. A rough, poorly demarcated path led over some scrubland that became more and more dense as I walked it. When I reached the lighthouse, I pressed my hand against the cold wood of the front door and pressed inward. No human hand had performed this task for seventy years. Inside, the darkness and silence of a forgotten pharaoh's tomb. There was a smell like dead, wet leaves and spoiled wine. The lighthouse had not been operational since 1927. I turned on my lantern and climbed the winding stone stairs to the top of the lighthouse. The only sound I heard was that of the humble waves against the beach, just barely audible. The stairs ended in a small circular room that looked out over the bay through a pair of windows clouded and caked with the remnants of age, though they had never been broken.

No one came to this island, ever. Those who did approach—adventurous tourists or tipsy boaters curious about these ugly little twelve acres—were invariably haunted by a strange and terrible feeling that an inexplicable danger was here. Many years ago, the secretary of state of this country landed here while on a solitary sailing excursion that ran into some minor distress. He wrote to a friend later that he had been overwhelmed by a feeling of dread the moment he set foot on the beach, and upon returning to the comfort of his cabin, found himself inexplicably frightened of rising from his bed for an entire day.

Looking through the west window, I saw the tiny shape of that second rowboat drifting across the bay toward the island, navigated by my enemy. He would arrive soon. It should have been too cold to stand there, waiting for him, too cold with the ancient stone conducting the chill into my body, but now that I was on the island I was able to use the white magic to warm myself. I could have stayed there all night, sleeping uncovered on the floor if I wished, but of course there would be no sleep for either of us.

He knocked on the door twenty minutes later. I opened it to see a young man standing there in the darkness, a man of no more than thirty-five years. I held up the lantern. His hair was cut mercilessly short, and he was clean-shaven. He was quite thin and wore a denim jacket and very dark blue jeans. He announced his name, which was Frosz, and asked for entrance, which of course I granted. His accent suggested he had been raised somewhere in northern Poland, or so I guessed. He put his hand out to shake mine, and I did so. He followed me up the spiral staircase. He was wearing a knapsack over one shoulder, and in the high room he set it on the musty stone floor. From it he took a bottle of *Domaine de la Romanée* and said he trusted I had a fine palate. There was also caviar—the finest, he assured me, from *Bandar-e Azali*—and crackers and a wedge of cheese if that was more my taste. Two plates and two glasses that my enemy informed me had been crafted in Madagascar for a prince.

We sat on the floor across the room from one another, resting our backs against the walls behind us, and ate and drank. And we talked about history, about the vineyard I owned and struggled with, about the Napoleonic Wars, about the meals we had eaten in faraway places. It was quite cordial, as was the custom. The extraordinary wine had no effect on either of us. After our meal there was still time before the arrival of the final message, and for Frosz that meant time for games. He clapped his hands once, and we stood. 'You first,' he invited me, and I nodded

and told him to approach the west window. I had nothing prepared, and so improvised my trick. 'Look at the shoreline,' I told him. He knelt briefly to move the lantern to a different spot on the floor so that its feeble glare would not strike the windowpane. He looked almost shockingly gaunt in that light, and I realized I was looking at a very sick man. Perhaps his challenge had been made in haste because of it. He looked downward through the window, seeing a distant horizon tinged in red over Long Island, and the sleepy bay that was laid out before us. I began by starting a fire in the sand down there. It rose from nothing, the shivering flames no more than three feet high, a campfire really, the only speck of light out there on the island.

From the delicate waves that lapped the shore, there then rose seven separate and unique sheets of water, ten feet apart, first nothing more than spiral wisps but cohering into more unusual shapes that were definable even in the dark. My enemy smiled as he watched them. I let them hover on the waves for a moment and then brought them slowly together to mold my creation. My eyes closed, and I was leaning up against the far wall. The sheets of water that had become arms, legs, a torso, and a head merged, and the man was made. He took his first and last steps on top of the water and walked onto the beach toward the campfire I'd started. He glimmered in the moonlight, six feet tall, stronger and bulkier in frame than I had been even in my robust youth. I made him kneel down before the fire. His face, that of a famous figure from military history, was immediately recognizable to my enemy, who laughed—though his eyes, cruel as any God had ever created, did not laugh. They were incapable of doing so. My water man raised his arms, and slowly he leaned forward and tipped over onto the fire. When the water struck it, it was quashed. Nothing remained of him but a puddle on the beach, fanning outward in many directions, quickly becoming ice.

My enemy scratched his chin and complimented me on my trick, and then offered to show me something more vivid. I felt the first spidery caress of fear on my heart. 'Come to the window,' he said, and I approached. Standing beside him, I felt physically the evil he had brought with him to the lighthouse, to the island, to the earth. Outside, far away, almost a mile perhaps, a lonely sailboat moved across the bay at walking speed, toward some distant harbor. Its mast had been lowered. I saw tiny orange lights on its rails. My night vision sharpened more and more, and I saw that the water around the boat was beginning to become choppy. It would do no good to plead for my enemy to stop. So I only watched. He had lightened the sky just enough to make clearer the sight I was about to see.

I heard no sound when something broke the surface of the water beside the sailboat, erupting upwards. It was a tentacle, a lashing, slithering thing as thick as a stout oak, and it stretched many yards above the sailboat, suggesting it was attached to something below the water ten times its size. The tentacle wrapped itself around the center of the boat and squeezed. The frame buckled; windows shattered. I saw but did not hear wood splinter and snap. Then the tentacle pulled the boat downward, into the bay. It tilted crazily on its side, the tentacle still squeezing, crushing, shattering, and I hope that its inhabitants were dead before they saw what had brought them to this moment. The boat vanished beneath the waves in seconds, creating a suction pool behind it, the water bubbling and frothing, and very soon it was gone for good. The bay swallowed it whole, and the water became docile again. My enemy turned to me with an awful smile. Up close I saw that he possessed one artificial eye, an expensive but still obvious replacement.

We agreed to have one more glass of wine. He suggested a toast to life itself. Our glasses clinked. As the *Domaine de la Romanée* soothed my throat, we heard the wolf outside the door down below. Unseen, it began to howl low and steady, the sound winding up the staircase. My enemy froze for just a moment with his glass to his lips, then continued to drink. It was then that his

face changed before me, revealing itself for what it truly was: a bottomless obsidian cavity with pinpricks of blood where a human's eyes should have been. Neither his transformation nor the wolf's howling lasted for very long; just long enough for us to hear and honor it. It was time.

I asked my enemy what he would have me, as the host of the battle and thus obligated to make a sacrifice, give up to the hunger of the Far Spider. He seemed to consider it briefly, though of course he had planned his response. 'Your hands,' he said, and again I nodded. So that we would be more comfortable in our final moments before what was to come, I created two simple wooden chairs for us by imagining them. Frosz dug into his knapsack again. I expected him to draw from it a knife or machete of some sort, but these were modern times after all, and instead he handed me a pair of heavy C-shaped metal boxes that fit easily into my palms. He instructed me on their use. All I needed to do was trigger a small, taut, one-inch wire that stretched between a small cutout section of each to make them operate. It seemed quite simple. I asked him in a somewhat unsteady voice where he had come across such devices. 'Kosovo,' he told me.

We took our respective chairs. I now sat roughly where my father had in 1943, just two months after returning from Bastogne, and where my grandfather had sat in 1920, and where his brother had sat only six years before that. That man, Karl by name, had been asked to give up his eyes as sacrifice, so perhaps my own wasn't so terrible. I looked at my enemy calmly by the light of the lantern. He wished me safe travels in the world beyond this one, and I wished him the same.

I relaxed and allowed the cold to claim my body once again, and that feeling was so strong in my spine as to be almost pleasurable. I looked up through the east window, at the small sliver of moon. I told my enemy that the wolf had returned to its place beside the Conqueror, and we were free to do as we must. Yes, he said, and told me I should proceed now. Closing my eyes one last time, I opened my mouth, and tensing my body against the trauma that was coming for me down a black and rotting tunnel, unleashed a deep, throat-ripping shout, hollering from the depths of my pitied soul, craning my head backwards, directing the sound off the cobweb-laden ceiling above me. Holding my hands far outward from my body as I had been instructed, I depressed the wires in both explosive devices. My hands were there one second, gone the next as a thrumming crack echoed in that circular chamber and the devices exploded. Shrieking pain snaked up both my arms and into the center of my chest, pulling and tearing at my heart from either side of my body.

I sensed my enemy moving across from me as every bit of magic I held within flowed outwards and over him in a venomous wave. I opened my eyes to see him being lifted upwards out of the chair, his feet rising off the floor, his entire body rising vertically before me. Three feet off the stone, then five, he levitated and stared hatefully down at me, and I believe now that it was saltwater pouring out of his eyes, saltwater running down the front of his collared black shirt. Then those eyes became grotesquely enlarged in their sockets as light pulsated behind them, a light of no color, a light possessing such energy coiled behind it that it could have cracked the earth if sent beyond the island. Instead, as Frosz hovered in the air, reaching out toward me with violently trembling arms that appeared to be trapped in the kind of haze within which one sees desert mirages, he spat his own magic at me with the force of nuclear fission.

I felt myself being lifted up, up, and then pushed downward again. A sightless and powerless rag doll, I struck the floor, and then felt my body being propelled into it, into the stone, matter driven impossibly into matter. I felt the stone envelop me, and I could see the ceiling high above as I descended, literally absorbed into the structure of the lighthouse. Six feet deep, then ten, my molecules swimming in darkness. I felt my body becoming thinner and thinner, till there

was only enough flesh on my bones to keep them intact. I caught a glimpse of my enemy staring down at me, and that was when I blacked out. For me, the battle was over seconds after it began. The last thing I heard was a roar, half-human and half-animal, that emerged from my enemy as he spent the last parts of himself trying to destroy me with his chaotic, murderous mind.

When I awoke, it was daylight. I was on the ground, lying face up, and a gray drizzle struck my face. It was dawn, but of which morning I didn't know. I was deep in the woods, resting on a natural bed of leaves, surrounded by dying trees and silence. My vision was blurry, and my head was pounding. I looked down at my prone, withered body. It had once been the body of a relatively fit man of fifty-seven, but I was perhaps thirty pounds lighter than I last remembered myself. Blood had dried on the cuffs of my long-sleeved shirt and spattered all the way up to my shoulders. My hands were gone. For fear of what I might see if I looked too closely, I gazed at the cloudy sky until consciousness left me, which happened with blessed speed.

I must have found my way to the nearest road, or perhaps been found by a concerned stranger, for I remember the siren of an ambulance and the image of an Asian woman leaning over me in the back of one. She was frowning, concerned not for the stumps at the ends of my arms, which had been crudely wrapped in gauze to stop the life-threatening blood loss, but for the twisting of the straps that held me taut to the support on which I lay.

After that, intravenous drips, a darkened hospital room, indistinct voices. I let myself drift in and out of sleep. Day became night and night became day again, and the cycle repeated itself. To avoid speaking, I embraced entirely the fog that enveloped me. When I could no longer feign unconsciousness or avoid the questions of the medical staff, I pleaded amnesia. I remembered nothing, I said, of anything that came after the dinner party. That seemed to satisfy them. I told them to refuse all visitors. They released me a day later. I did not particularly listen when they described the rehabilitation process to me, and the options I had for living life with my new handicap. I needed to simply be away from there as soon as possible. An orderly helped me put my clothes on, and I got into a cab outside the hospital. The cab driver, a man from Kenya who had once attended medical school, drove me all the way to the estate after I invited him to take my wallet—and my bank card—and make a single stop to withdraw as much money as it would take to deliver me to my destination and then complete one more task for me.

We pulled onto the estate well past dark. It was five days after I had met my enemy. My driver followed me around toward the back of the house. Once or twice he had to assist me when I became dizzy. I had not eaten for several hours and nearly passed out. When he asked me if I lived in this grand house, I told him no one had for thirty years. There were other rowboats, older and more decrepit, housed in the horse stable on the most forested side of the property. I was not able to help the driver in dragging one down to the shore. We climbed in, and he manned the oars. It was even colder than it had been five nights before, but he complained not at all. I was certainly paying him enough not to do so. Like me, he had to stop rowing every five minutes to warm his hands and his ears.

When the rowboat bumped against the shore of the island, I bade him wait by the fire I felt myself just strong enough to create. He seemed confused at the sudden appearance of this fire nearby, but walked off toward it after asking me if I was going to be able to make it to wherever I was going. I knew he would be more confused still when he saw that the fire's foundation was only sand, but I cared little. Cradling a lantern in the crook of my right elbow, I staggered

through the brush and scrub toward the lighthouse, which stood dark as ever. I pushed the front door inward. As I did, I looked to my left, sensing a presence nearby. There, in the tattered undergrowth, beside a withered tree, stood a gray wolf. It looked at me emptily, with neither respect nor contempt, only a vacuous animal curiosity. The wolf, the island's only permanent resident, hundreds of years old, watched me enter the lighthouse.

I made my way with great difficulty up the winding stone staircase, gently touching the insect-infested wooden handrails built by my great-great-grandfather, the most powerful warlock in all of North America. There was more illumination in here than before; the moon was full and bright. I could not steady myself with my hands, and so the going was slow. Five steps from the top of the staircase, my foot kicked something and there was an echoing clink. I saw by the light of the lantern the empty bottle of wine that I had shared with my enemy. What was it doing here? I wondered. And I stayed where I was for a long moment, knowing that magic was not the only way I could be killed. I listened for some tiny whisper of sound that might tell me Frosz was somewhere above or behind me, in the dark, waiting to stab me to death, cut my throat. There was a thin, reedy whistling sound coming from high above me. It was the wind seeping through a shattered window up there. The longer I stood waiting for Frosz to appear, the more scared I became, and so I moved.

I reached the top of the staircase and looked into the circular room. Leaves skittered across the floor, having blown in through gaping holes in the glass all around. I could only see clearly between breaths, for the frosty air that emerged from my mouth clouded my vision. However, there was nothing here to remember save for the thing that now defaced the center of the room, a crude new feature that will not be seen by any man until the night my son comes to the lighthouse—hopefully after having lived a full life, but not so old as to have lost too much of his considerable powers—and casts the pale glow of his lantern across the lonely enclosure. The mummified body of my enemy was partially embedded in the floor, withered and shrunk by half as if the work of a thousand years had worn him to a fragment of what he once was, like the indistinct ghosts of Pompeii. He had been entombed in stone, knees fused to the floor, as he crawled plaintively toward the window, one arm outstretched as if reaching it would have saved him somehow. There was very little detail of his face left, but what there was spoke of a pain few can imagine. The man's mouth was open so wide in a silent scream that the very structure of the jaw had mutated.

He was not the only man to have become a permanent part of the very structure of the lighthouse. Dozens of seemingly natural flaws, indentations, and bumps in the stone throughout were actually, upon closer look, remnants of the fallen. Toward the bottom of the staircase, thirty inches up the wall on the left side, was the shape of a man's foot, wholly embedded and seeming to push out from within. Further up the staircase, on the opposite wall, was what appeared to be the crown of a man's head, enveloped entirely in the blind stone. A mutation in the ceiling above me was in actuality the right side of the screaming face of the malevolent African shaman who had challenged my father for supremacy in 1943. The rest of the shaman's body, torn asunder in the battle that took place in this room, was scattered in bits and pieces throughout the walls, as were the bodies of the other evil men who had tried and failed to make my family succumb. Eyes, hands, fingers, bits of body too small to be identified: all were sealed just below the surface of the stone inside this lighthouse where the world was defended from destruction. It served as a grotesque museum of our hollow victories.

My son would be the next to fight. An invitation would come in the form of a gathering of silent winter wrens; he would have to leave his family in the small hours, perhaps never to see them again; he would row to the island to face his enemy. It would happen just once in his lifetime.

He was now thirty-two years old. I myself need never use the island again, thank God. I will die soon, but it will not be a violent death. And never will I need to return to the lighthouse and cast eyes through the darkness upon the hideous statue of an evil man who will not be the last to make that little room into a place where unthinkable combat is waged beside a sleepy bay.

legend

My name is Patrick Kind. I have absolutely no proof of what happened to me in December of 1990, twenty-four years ago now, when I was 20 years old. I want to tell the story one more time before even more detail is lost to me. On a Sunday morning—I think it was the 8th—I drove my old Datsun for hours into the mountains of West Virginia to a place as remote as I'd ever been, a very small town called Grenza, thirty miles east of Elkins. I'd booked a room in an old bed and breakfast for a couple of days during winter break from college; my favorite thing to do back then was head off somewhere all alone with a couple of books, just disappear for two days or so.

I was too young and dumb to cancel the trip even when I got a weather report for Grenza and the surrounding area that was promising significant snowfall. The last hour and a half of driving was all isolated mountain roads, and by noon the car was slipping, the snow packed hard on the pavement. I was getting really worried, but I had reached a point where going back seemed it might be as dicey as going forward, so I pushed on. It took me forty-five minutes to go the last ten miles. I was scared to go any faster for fear of wrecking. It felt like I was the only one on the road except for two plows going in the other direction. I barely realized it when I entered Grenza, which was settled by German woodworkers in 1855. It was as deep in the mountains as I'd ever seen a place. There were a few houses nestled off a small road, and that was it; there wasn't even a town per se. I spotted the bed and breakfast, but it was down a long steep driveway blanketed under inches of snow. I overestimated the Datsun's capabilities, and halfway down it completely lost traction, slowly angling, and all I could do was turn in the direction of the skid until I came to a soft rest fifteen feet off the driveway. I would have to deal with getting out of there on Tuesday morning.

The woman whom I'd called for a reservation had told me to walk over to the adjacent house where she actually lived and where the restaurant was; it was just up the hill. Her name was Laurel; she was about seventy, and pretty amazed at how young I was. I knew I was the only guest that weekend, but Laurel told me my isolation would be more intense than I thought. Bill and Bev Dietrich, the old couple who ran the post office a few hours each weekday and sometimes opened the historic mill and printing press house for tourists, had left suddenly a few days before. Technically, Laurel and I were the only people in the legal town limits of Grenza that weekend. From its population high point of 130 in 1970, there were now only twenty-four residents, and aside from Laurel and the Dietrichs, they all lived much, much farther down Acorn Road, not even in walking distance, really. Laurel broke the news about the Dietrichs'

departure with some distress in her voice. Her summer helper was gone, so she would make my breakfast and dinner.

I thanked her, took my key, and trudged through the falling snow over to the little house I'd have all to myself. It was an old thing, cold, in disrepair, but I guess attractive to summer folk who really craved isolation. The most telling detail about the condition of the house was that it had no working locks. Laurel had meant to refurbish them recently, but there didn't seem to be any hurry or even need. She told me that a chair set outside on the porch would tell her I wanted privacy. I went up the creaky steps, threw my backpack on the bed in my bedroom, and looked out the window down at my poor car. Then I looked up at all that white nothingness, and up at the rows and rows of trees to the north. I could see the tops of the mountains far, far away, just visible through the mist. Something happened to me in that moment that had never happened before. Maybe, just maybe you know the feeling I got and that I'll try to describe. It came all at once, this sense that something was very wrong here, and that I had made a terrible mistake. I was farther away from my world than I'd ever been, and that was okay, but what wasn't okay was my feeling that I'd come at a bad time. Grenza looked dead but secretive somehow. Who knew how medical help got here in a snowfall like this, or where the hospital or the police station were. I looked around and saw there was no phone, though I'd spotted one at the main house, of course. A weird shiver went up my right arm.

It stopped snowing as I was staring out the window. It was going to be ghastly cold that night and the next day, so I decided that if I was going to go for any kind of conservative hike while I was here, it might have to be now. I stopped in at the main house to ask Laurel if I could maybe get a sandwich to tide me over for the next few hours. She was sitting in a rocking chair very close to the front window, looking out over Acorn Road with a very worried look on her face. She actively tried to talk me out of walking any farther than the mill. There were bears here sometimes, and people got lost. She was extremely persistent. Finally she went into the kitchen so dejected that I was left to feel like I was abandoning her.

While I waited I looked around the front room. Every inch of wall space was covered with old paintings and hangings, mostly done by local people from the looks of them. There was one very clumsily done watercolor hanging low and out of the way at the back of the room that caught my eye because it was so strange. It was a view looking down on Grenza from one of the mountain slopes that surrounded it. In the foreground was a trail of footprints in the snow, moving away from my perspective, prints that just sort of ended. The painting actually had a caption, printed also in watercolor, in black, all capital letters. It read: *Walking people, go back.* When Laurel came out of the kitchen, wrapping up my sandwich, I asked her about it, about what that meant. She seemed to think about it for a long moment before she answered, like she didn't know whether she should talk about it. She had dug that picture out of storage only a few days before. Her son had done it when he was sixteen. He lived in Montana now. All she said was that no one in Grenza wanted to see the walking people ever come again, and that she put the painting up sometimes when it felt like they were watching, or they were near. When the silence drew out after that, I decided not to ask her anything more. Obviously there was some senility here, something I couldn't deal with. I thanked her for the sandwich and told her I'd be there for dinner at 5:30.

I had hours to kill before then. I headed down something called Wildberry Lane, which branched off Acorn Road toward the woods. I walked past the historic mill and the little old house where the region's first printing press had been housed. Neither had been operational for more than fifty years. I moved my scarf up from my neck to the bottom of my face and wondered how long I could last out here. The clouds above me were moving quickly across the

sky, and I forgot what exactly that meant, but they looked dark and thick. The road wound around to the right, and the downslope got steeper and steeper as the woods crowded in. It dead-ended after about a half-mile, but not before a short trail branched off it to my left. It was only about forty yards long, and there was a sign there marking something: Bachmeier Cemetery. The sign looked so old that I thought the graves themselves might be of some interest, so I decided to check it out. By now I was breathing pretty hard as the cold stung my lungs.

The cemetery was built on a fairly dramatic slope, and as I suspected, most of the graves seemed very old, a lot of the tombstones tilting, askew. I walked among them, reading random names and dates. There were a lot of German last names. The most recent death seemed to be 1980 or so. The little place was sadly pretty somehow, lying under the snow. I stood there and tried to appreciate the solitude, the incredible clean air, the sense of history. But it took a conscious effort. Even the cruel grayness of the sky made me feel too isolated and uncomfortable. At one edge of the cemetery was a monument off to itself, about five feet high, standing beside a tree. Someone had paid a visit recently; a large wooden crucifix had been plunged into the soil in front of it, and some kind of wreath had been merely leaned against it. The wreath was extraordinarily odd. It had been crafted carefully from ivy and pine in a fairly traditional way, but there was something else woven through. I had to touch it to confirm it was real. It was the skin of a long snake, an actual one. Whatever kind was common to these parts, I supposed. And here was its head at the end of it. Its eyes had been removed. At first I didn't think there were any letters on the monument at all, but it was just an illusion of the snow clinging to it. I brushed some of it away and read these words: *So that the walking people may not come often.* Nothing else. No attribution.

Leaving the cemetery, that feeling came again, the feeling of being woefully out of place, unwelcome here, but now there was something else. I felt a genuine fear of everything around me; of what might be in the woods, in the cemetery, on the silent road. My body was sending me signals that danger was near, but it had no single source. I wanted to run down that path back toward Acorn Road, but I forced myself to walk and not panic. The trudge back up Wildberry Lane was steep and painful. The thought that I should get out of Grenza right now was irrational but persistent. Twice as I went up the hill, then a third time, I looked back at the spot where the path led into Bachmeier Cemetery, and I was certain somehow that someone was about to appear there, following me. I tried to tell myself that the sudden plunge into isolation was responsible for every bit of this panic, but I knew there was more to it. My skin had begun to tingle, and I just stopped for a moment when the mill came into view, trying to settle myself.

There was a house behind the mill, built on the adjoining property. I'd noticed it before, but now something about it really stood out strongly. From where I was standing I had a good view of the front porch. There were three wreaths hung on the railing, spaced a few feet apart from one another. They were identical to the one I had seen in the cemetery. I cut around the mill and actually stood on the lawn of that little house, trying to make out the name on the mailbox. Yes, the name was Dietrich. Gone now, this older couple; I didn't know why. No car in the snow-covered driveway. The low whistle of the wind curled around that dark brick building and blew snow off their roof.

By the time I got back to Acorn Road my ears and fingers were numb from the cold, even under my hat and gloves. I checked on my car, resting awkwardly sideways on the sloping drive. It started just fine, but as I suspected, the wheels just spun and spun. It would take someone giving me a serious push just to straighten out, and after that, I would have to gun it up the slope and

hope for the best. But there seemed to be no one here. No one. Up in the unreserved bedroom that was down the hallway from mine, I sat for a while and just stared out the window at the two houses I could just barely see up Acorn Road. There was a *For Sale* sign in front of one, and the other was just shuttered. I decided to go to my room and sleep until dinner, get under the covers and just calm down. As soon as I began to drift off under those warm quilts I heard an engine, what sounded like a small car out on Acorn Road. It made me feel a little better.

When I woke up it was dark outside. I wasn't sure at first what time it was. I knew only one thing: that I was scared. While I had slept something had turned for the worse, and how that sense had worked itself into me, I don't know. But I didn't even want to move from the bed. I was afraid to turn on the light, afraid of what I might see if I did. For ten minutes I lay there wondering why I was coming apart, and then I forced myself out of the bed and onto my feet. I went back to the unreserved bedroom and looked out the window, where Acorn Road was now lit feebly by streetlights that left long patches of the road barely visible. Not the slightest sign of human presence. Even the thought of crossing the property to the main house was a dreadful one to me—stepping out into the dark and the cold, all alone. I was going there now for one reason, which was to call for a tow truck. After doing some mental calculation I figured that if I gave a driver all the money I had, he might agree to tow me all the way back to Route 219, where the road would certainly be clear enough at that lower elevation to drive safely far away. I had no intention of spending the night here with the thought that by midnight I might be going insane with the feeling that the town around me was closing in on me. I was simply going to abort this whole trip, and I could laugh about it and make fun of myself from the comfort of my home hours away.

It had become bitterly cold, and the wind had picked up. I narrowed my eyes to slits as I ran up across the property to the main house, slipping a couple of times, almost going down into the snow. It seemed like there was only one light on inside, the kitchen light. I crossed the porch and found the front door still unlocked. I went in and shut the door fast behind me, shivering. The front room was dark. I called out Laurel's name and didn't get an answer. I walked down a short hallway and into the roomy kitchen where that lone light was. A clock on the wall told me it was 8:15. 8:15. Somehow I had slept for almost six hours. The spotlessness of the kitchen told me no one had been in here preparing dinner, expecting me to come over at 5:30. I walked back into the front room knowing what I would see if I looked out the window, and I was right. I'd asked if Laurel owned the light pickup truck that had been parked out front, and she'd said yes, and now it was gone, a fact I hadn't registered with my head down against the wind a few minutes before. She'd left me alone in Grenza. I was now the only one here. Of this there seemed no question.

There was a phone in a little breakfast nook, and the yellow pages were right there beside it. The line was working fine. The first towing service I called told me there was no way they could get me out unless I could wait till morning; their three trucks had been pressed into service plowing Route 33, which led west to Elkins. But I got lucky with the second. A man named Bill answered the phone, and he was willing to come himself for the price I offered, and he would get me exactly where I needed to go. He said he didn't think it would be a problem to get to Grenza by eleven or so. I thanked him and hung up. More than anything I wanted to keep talking. I even considered making more calls to see if I could somehow find someone who would come right now, but it seemed like too much a shot in the dark. Walking back to the front door, I saw the note on the end table beside it, folded in half. It had my name on it. Laurel had written it. It said: *Mr. Kind, I'm sorry. I've left. I've gone to my sister's house in Morgantown. I called to you from below your window, but you didn't answer.* She'd left with her only guest waiting for dinner;

she'd left on dangerous roads in freezing cold to drive to a town ninety miles away, leaving no number.

I wrapped my scarf around my face and opened the front door again. The wind struck me instantly. As I ran from the front porch across the drive and to the other house, I wondered if I should make a call to the police and claim an injury, a crime, anything to get them to take me out of here. I could say I hit my head in the slide I took in my car. I could do it. But I would hate myself for my collapse into paranoia. The second I got inside the house I slammed the door behind me and leaned back against it, breathing hard. There was nothing to do now but wait. In a few hours I would be out of Grenza and safe, as if there were anything truly sinister here. I didn't like all the lights on suddenly. And I didn't want to go back upstairs. I had the insane thought, the sadomasochistic thought that the creaking of the stairs would tell whatever might be above me that I had returned, that I was coming back to the bedroom. I couldn't stop thinking this way. I turned off the lights, and I sat in the middle of the couch that sat facing Acorn Road. I felt better when I was in the dark. I felt hidden from what might be outside. I had a wide view of what was out there. This was exactly where I'd stay, waiting. Thoughts of food or sleep didn't occur to me. The thought that kept rising unbidden in my mind was, *You are completely alone. You are completely alone.*

I need to describe the scene exactly here. Acorn Road stretched from left to right in front of me, a little more than seventy-five yards from the edge of the property. The near side of the road was clear; the far side, the background so to speak, was mostly trees except for an empty field where Laurel had told me she picked flowers for the guests' breakfast tables in summer. The streetlamps were bent from age and the constant oppressive wind, shining down on the road, which was a sheet of white, an inch of snow and ice packed onto it. That snow whipped down and swirled every time there was a wind gust. This was all framed by the big picture window before me and the dark living room. The walls were thin, and I could hear the constant whine of the wind, so lonely. Sometime before ten I developed a ringing in my ears that wouldn't go away, and my head began to throb. I started to suffer a phenomenon from books I had read, which I had thought was just fictional convenience, and that was my hands beginning to shake. I looked down at them with detached curiosity. It was like they didn't belong to me anymore. There wasn't anything I could do to stop them.

10:15, 10:30. That was when it happened. I saw a man out there, moving into view on Acorn Road out of the blind spot to the east. He was walking very slowly and heavily right down the center of the road, looking straight ahead. He had a beard, I remember. His clothes were archaic. They were not of this time, and he wore no coat, no hat, no scarf. He looked pale, so pale. Behind him came another human being, also walking with that strange motion as if they were both lost but didn't even feel the cold. This man was looking up at the sky as he walked. When they talk about farmers or blacksmiths of past centuries, that was what he was wearing. Exposed like that in this cold would have brought on frostbite in minutes. A woman came next, one of the tallest women I had ever seen, deathly thin. Her hair was blown around crazily by the wind. She wore a long, long gray or black dress. I saw that there was nothing on her feet at all, at all. They seemed unaware of each other somehow as they moved. A bead of sweat ran down my cheek and settled on my upper lip. And then there was one more, a man who had no arms. They were both gone. Otherwise he was just like them, and moved just like them. Now the first in the procession was out of my sightline, having moved down Acorn Road. They were oblivious to what was to either side of them. They seemed to want only to keep moving forward.

The second they were all gone, I felt something unlock inside me, and I could move. I got up swiftly from the couch, wiping sweat off my face, and I turned and I almost ran up the stairs. I

moved down the dark hallway and entered the bedroom. I closed the door and backed up to the edge of the bed, and sat on it. I knew I was safe because I was now behind two doors, this one and the one downstairs. But I swear it wasn't ten minutes later that I heard that door open down there. It came to me very clearly. I heard the wind come in, but the door never closed again, never shut against the frame. I moved to my window, the one overlooking the back of the property. I unlatched it, pushed it up. Two inches of snow had collected around it, and some of it blew into the room. I dragged the desk chair near me over and climbed onto it. It was going to be a tight squeeze to get out, but I did not hesitate.

I maneuvered my torso out onto the sloping roof, putting my hands right into the snow. My hat and gloves, I'd taken off when I'd come in. They were downstairs. I hoisted myself up, twisting so that I had to face the starry sky above as I squeezed out. The slope was dangerous only because the roof's surface was so slippery now. I held onto the window as long as I could. By the time I swung my legs out my backside already felt frozen from contact with the snow through my jeans. Lying there on the roof at an almost forty-five degree angle, I propped myself up just long enough to slide the window down. Then I rolled three feet to my left and on my back I waited, staring up at the black sky, resting my head back. I couldn't turn it to keep an eye on the window because to do so brought my cheek in contact with the snow and that was unbearable. I guessed that I could wait maybe ten or fifteen minutes like that before I absolutely had to climb back in. It was torture. The wind seemed twice as strong up there. It became an awful test of endurance as the minutes went by. Tears were frozen on my face, and my fingers were numb. My ears stung painfully. Finally I did turn my head to look at the window. My angle wouldn't let me see into the room. At the absolute extremity of my endurance, the window slid up its frame. Two inches. Then it stopped.

I made my decision instantly. I pushed myself frantically down the roof toward its edge until the ice made me slip helplessly downwards. I struck the gutter hard, and there was a burst of pain in my hip. I was in full control when I leapt off. Thinking back on the structure of the house as I dimly remember it, I was lucky to jump where I did, at a point low enough so that I hit the snow hard and lost my balance but broke nothing. I caught most of a hedge on my way down. My first attempt to stagger to my feet failed, and I collapsed, too dizzy to keep my balance. But then I found the strength to run, limping badly. The slope that led to my car was too steep to navigate in my condition, so I covered the last twenty yards scrambling on my hands and knees, barely in control. My keys were in my pocket. I stood, leaning against the car, and got the door open. I sprawled low across the front seat and slammed it shut again, locking it. I had no intention of trying to start the car because I knew I was stuck. So what I did was lie face up on the front seat, my head below the passenger's side window, seeing a sliver of night sky high above me and nothing else. I was wheezing. My lungs were in agony.

Headlights washed over the car before I had even begun to settle down. I heard the rumble of an engine coming very close, and I leapt up, scrambling to unlock the door. The tow truck appeared at the top of the slope, and instead of the darkest scenario coming true—the driver going past, unable to make out the address and seeing no sign of human presence—he stopped right where he should. I clambered out of the car and made my way up the slope, trying to calm myself, telling myself that there was no need to tell him anything more than he needed to know. I looked at the house, saw nothing out of the ordinary. The front door was shut. I almost sounded normal when I thanked the man profusely for coming. He said I was welcome to sit in the cab of his truck where it was warm while he went about the business of dragging me out, and I followed him to it. Tilting my head up as I went, I could not see the other side of the house and the upstairs window I had climbed through. He took us down and asked me if I had been in a fall. I said yes, a little one. As he set up the tow outside in the wind he was never more than

twenty feet away from me, so I felt secure. That one human presence wiped away the fear. I was thankful that he kept his engine running, creating an intrusive sound of activity and industry that crushed the silence in Grenza. But I never stopped scanning the world outside the truck's windows. Acorn Road was empty and snow-blown. The woods in the distance were dark. The wind bent the trees gently. That one light was still on in the main house where Laurel lived. Her front door was shut too.

When we got up the slope and pulled onto Acorn Road, my eyes went to its surface of packed snow and ice, the pavement showing through only in small patches. We began to drive in the direction where those people had come from, toward Route 522. I saw no footprints in the beam of the headlights. We left Grenza behind. I asked the tow truck driver where he was from. Mongoose, thirty miles south. I asked him if he'd ever heard of a local legend, the walking people. The answer was no.

Two days after I was back safe at home in Annapolis, I called the bed and breakfast. I got no answer. Nor did I get an answer a week after that, or a week after that. I vowed to drive back to Grenza as soon as there was no chance of bad weather, even the slightest possibility of a sudden snowfall. But life got in the way, and my spring vacation plans changed. That summer I transferred to Ohio State. I told the story many times to many people over the years, starting with my father as soon as I returned from Grenza. I suppose I wanted someone to believe me so completely that they themselves would drive there and see what I'd seen, but no one ever did. Maybe there were just too many details that left themselves open to the slight possibility of a normal explanation. Could it be that nothing I'd seen on Acorn Road was in itself provable as supernatural in nature? Could the hands that pushed up my bedroom window have belonged to someone I just didn't realize was in Grenza? Once in a while I'd meet someone who'd heard of Grenza and maybe passed through it without much of a story to tell. As the Internet grew I occasionally tried to find out more information about its local legends. I never found the slightest thing of interest. One or two photographs of that strange monument in the graveyard, that was it.

It wasn't until last summer that I drove back, more than two decades after that long winter's night. I had my wife and teenaged daughter with me. They knew the story and were sort of excited to go on this exotic detour from our weekend trip to see friends in Pittsburgh. The main road had been rerouted seven years before, though, so the trip was longer and more circuitous than ever before. There was no one left in Grenza now. Acorn Road hadn't been repaved for a very long time, and the streetlights had been taken away. Laurel's house was still standing, but it was for sale and the one where I'd stayed for just a few hours had been torn down, and so had the house of the Dietrichs. The mill was still there, but not the building with the printing press. We parked in what was now just another patch of country road, not a town, and together we all walked down Wildberry Lane toward Bachmeier Cemetery. It was a beautiful sunny day. My daughter listened to pop music on her headphones, and my wife commented on how pretty it all was.

The sign that marked the cemetery came into view. Nothing had really changed on that hillside. Someone was still occasionally maintaining it. And the strange monument to the walking people was right where I remembered it. Seeing it for the first time in all those years brought back a vivid sense of how cold it had been when I'd discovered it, how my ears had stung, how young and reckless I'd been. Those words proved to my family that it had all really happened the way I said it did, or so I like to believe. The wreath woven through with snakeskin was gone. My wife asked me if I wanted her to take a picture, but I said no. I thought we shouldn't do that.

It made me afraid somehow, the thought of challenging the walking people in that way. We walked back to our car and drove away.

mountains

My name is Paul Keenum. I'm a writer by trade—a struggling one, but a writer all the same. Sometimes when the writer's block comes, the only thing I know to do to really fix it is to go camping, completely isolate myself, and hack through it inside my tent, do some hiking, clear my head. I had one of these little adventures two months ago. I took the weekend and I drove down Skyline Drive in northern Virginia into Shenandoah National Park, intending to camp Saturday and Sunday. I like to be as far away from people as possible, yet still have some sort of contact, so I always take my fully charged cellphone.

On the way into the area I stopped at one of the ranger stations to get a backwoods map. As I was talking to the ranger a little, I could hear a friend of his, who was in the little shack with him, talking in the background. He was currently obsessed with reading something on his phone, making occasional small exclamations. I asked him what was going on, and he said there had been a murder nearby. A body had been found eight miles south of the park in a little town called Slumber, which I'd actually driven through to stop for gas. The murder had been especially grisly; the authorities had found a decapitated body. The guy tracking the story on his phone seemed darkly excited that this horrible thing had happened so close.

Anyway, I got my backwoods map. I left that place and I drove another four miles or so down the road, until it went from a single lane to becoming unpaved, and then not a whole lot more than a double line of tire ruts, very grassy and overgrown. At some point I turned off them. I went about one hundred yards into the woods, bumping over the grass, to a spot that wasn't quite an official backwoods site, but it was close enough. Trees surrounded me and I was sufficiently isolated.

As dark fell I pitched my little tent, then took my laptop and its batteries out of the backseat of the car. I made myself a little dinner by the light and heat of a small fire, then after sitting and enjoying the silence around me for a couple of hours, I went into my tent for the night, exhausted. Looking at my map by the light of a lantern, I saw that I was fairly close to a little area called Gargoyle Bend. It's a strange formation of rocks that look like faces, enormous rocks taller than I am. I decided that the next day I would head down there for a hike, walk around for an hour or two to sort out the details of a new story I was working on.

I slept that night a little bit strangely. I drifted in and out of consciousness. In my dreams there were vague mental images of claws, and more specifically, the sounds that claws might make against a metal surface. That sound kept coming back to me, and it seemed that sometimes I was awake when they came and sometimes I was asleep. I woke up at dawn groggy and cold, and not terribly refreshed, but energetic enough to do a little bit of writing and then take my

first major walk. The problem was that I realized I had left the little canvas bag containing my original story notes back at the gas station in Slumber where I had stopped the day before at three o'clock. Basically, my working method is to make a lot of handwritten notes and then transcribe them. In this case, I realized I had stupidly left my notes on top of the toilet tank back in the men's room at that ancient, ugly station. My first instinct was to get on my cellphone and call the station and ask them if they could kindly hold it for me. But I stopped and disconnected in the middle of dialing. This is the ridiculous part of the story: I had actually left the gas station without paying for a map. When I'd pulled in and begun to pump my fuel, the station attendant had come out to meet me. He was a very, very strange man. We exchanged a couple of words, and I had asked him where the bathroom was. When I came back from it, he was simply gone. He was not inside the little office; he wasn't anywhere. In my hand I was holding a map of Virginia that had been propped up in a plastic caddy on the stained counter. I waited as long as was reasonable for the attendant to come back, but he simply never did. I got so frustrated that I left a ten dollar bill on the counter, which wasn't quite enough to pay for the gas. And I took the map with me. I was resentful that he would disappear and leave me waiting like that. It was just one of those moments of self-righteous, privileged rage. I didn't want to get into the issue out here while I was camping, and so I didn't complete the call, silently kissing those notes goodbye.

I was in my tent for about an hour, and at about ten o'clock I started to hear the day's first raindrops smacking the roof. I knew there had been a pretty good chance of rain, but I didn't know it was going to start so early. I looked out bleakly. I was going to have to get out my good rain gear, which I kept in the trunk of my Toyota. I walked over to the car and got out my key ring, and when I fiddled for the trunk key, I found that it wasn't on the ring at all. More great news. Honestly, I couldn't remember the last time I'd been inside my trunk for anything. Even groceries I usually set in my back seat. I gave up fairly quickly trying to remember where I left that trunk key, trying to remember the trunk's contents: my hydraulic jack, my spare tire, and my rain gear. The day was shaping up just great. I had lost my notes, I didn't know where my trunk key was, and it was raining. Still, I was determined to hike.

I started to walk down toward Gargoyle Bend. It took me about half an hour to get there after I used my compass and my park map to locate a thin, relatively easy trail. I didn't encounter anyone else as I went, which was to be expected given the weather and how secluded I was. The unusual rocks were just as I remembered them; I hadn't seen them since I was a teenager. I took a few pictures, then headed back, mentally outlining my new story as I went and trying to remember bits and pieces of my lost notes. Back at camp, with the rain tapering off to a drizzle, I sat in the front seat of the car and ate a couple of granola bars, then went back to my tent. I didn't come out of there until almost dark, writing in the laptop in a frenzy that was impressive for me. Just before I started to go about the process of building a fire, it stopped raining entirely, thank goodness.

I was relatively comfortable when full dark came, and I had the fire going strong. I sat in my camp chair eating Ritz crackers, raw fruit and some beef jerky, enjoying the snap of the embers and hearing the movements of small wildlife in the woods just beyond the fire's glow. My car was parked only about eight feet away, and there was enough light to notice something unusual. I knew there had been a small dent in the trunk since that morning; I figured something might have fallen onto it from a tree above, which was certainly a known hazard out here. But the firelight showed me that dent at a new angle, and it appeared to me now that the metal was actually pushing *outward*. That could only have made sense if I had closed the trunk on something; I supposed it was possible, but I certainly couldn't remember such an incident. Maybe I had slammed the trunk onto the jack when it was positioned at the wrong moment, but

even that seemed implausible. I got up and examined the dent for a while, running my finger over it, baffled. I remembered a gearhead friend of mine once describing some phenomenon called metal constriction, a result of sudden temperature spikes or something, but my memory of what he'd said was faded beyond use.

I went to bed earlier than I thought I would, at maybe nine o'clock. I was tired of writing. The plot I'd come up with wasn't working very well. I thought I might want to stay in the woods an extra day, until I was really feeling it. I didn't sleep very well and I came awake in the pitch dark around 3 a.m. Something had awoken me; some sound, but it was on the very edge of my consciousness. There had been a bang, or some object hitting another, or maybe even a gunshot in the distance. Whatever it had been, it evaded my grasp; I came awake too late to know exactly what it was. I lay prone again in my sleeping bag, waiting for it to come back, but it never did.

I remained awake listening to the occasional gust of wind shift the leaves, the movement of faraway deer, the scuttling of what I imagined were raccoons. And I thought about my twenty minutes or so back at the gas station, back in the town of Slumber, the day before. Not even in the town itself; the creaky station sat on lonely Route 52 all alone well before you even got to the town limits. I had pulled into it because I was pretty desperate for fuel, and I really wanted a map of the area in case my cellphone couldn't produce one out here. I'd gotten out of my old Toyota, started pumping my gas at the single pump, and then out of the office had come a man in greasy overalls. He was maybe fifty years old, pudgy, unhealthy. His hair was thinning but very unevenly. Little patches of it were missing, and he smiled at me very strangely. When I asked him where the bathroom was, I had to repeat the question. It was almost as if he himself didn't know where it was, and had to remind himself. Maybe he was mentally slow or something. My intent was to pay him after I got back from the bathroom. Even before I left to go there he started asking me a couple of questions, like where I was from and very specifically where I was headed, and what I planned on doing while I was there. He slurred his speech a little, spoke in a mumble. After I obliged him by telling him where I was going and for how long and threw in the obligatory comment about the weather, he looked at me with a weird half-smile, and he said, 'Going to be a good time to put on the makeup.'

It was such an odd thing to say that I thought I must have misheard. I ended the conversation and walked off toward the men's room, and when I came out a few minutes later he was gone. We were right beside the highway, so he really couldn't have gone anywhere. I walked around the back of the building. There was no garage bay, no nothing. Maybe he'd gone into the little house that sat behind the station, which was a very short hike up a hill. As I lay there in my tent I reminded myself that the simplest solutions almost always worked, and that he must have simply abandoned me in a fit of absentmindedness, as if he'd forgotten I couldn't pay with a credit card at the pump, forgotten what an archaic joke the station was.

I never did get back to sleep that night. I wanted to do a little sky-gazing so I got up at 4:30, cold and tired, and left the tent, then spent a few minutes refreshing the dead embers of the fire. After warming myself a bit, I walked off a ways into the woods so I could check out the unblemished sky. I roamed far enough from my campsite to a point where I couldn't really perceive much of it if I turned and peered through the woods. All I could detect was the ambient glow of the campfire and its glint off the rear bumper of the Toyota. I couldn't stop thinking about the gas station. Pieces of some subconscious jigsaw puzzle seemed to be trying to fit themselves together into a disturbing whole. I decided to turn my phone on and finally call the station. My curiosity was getting truly intense. To my surprise, I got a pretty good cell signal and did a quick search of area gas stations for the number. The one I believe I wanted was listed merely as Sherman's Fuel. I dialed the number, standing in the dark, shivering a little, watching

the tiny glow of the campfire far away. There were several rings. I don't know what I was expecting. It was ridiculous. But I now felt like I *had* to call, because I *knew* I had felt my trunk key on the ring when I had first gotten out of my car to pump gas. I just knew it somehow, a trace memory I had to work hard to summon. This realization sunk into me like a little knife made of ice. Nine, ten rings and there was no answer at the station; but of course this made perfect sense, as it was not even dawn. The very effort was absurd.

I trudged back through the woods, and when I got to my campfire, I immediately saw that the trunk of my car was open. Not by a few inches or so; it was *wide* open, as if someone had completely sprung it. Seeing that from about ten feet away, I froze in my tracks. The light of the fire was too dim to enable me to see through the car's windows, which is where my gaze kept wandering. There was something lying on the ground in the dirt circle I had created around the fire: my hydraulic jack, which I always kept in the trunk.

Very slowly I backed away from the car and the campfire. I turned and looked into the woods, completely dark. I didn't know whether to run into them or try to get into the car. I had no way of knowing where the person was who had made this happen. In the end, it was the woods that I went to. I backed into them at first, watching for any sign of movement near the car. Then I did begin to run, in the general direction of Gargoyle Bend, and not once did I stop or even misstep in the dark as the path wound through the trees. Often I couldn't run at full speed because my visibility was so bad, even with a full moon, but never did I consider slowing to a walk.

When I got to the Bend, panting, a stitch in my side, I could see the stones in the dark rising up and hear the trickle of a stream nearby, and I felt almost on familiar ground. I leaned against one of the stones and I called the police. They picked up instantly. I told them that I was deep in the woods, and I felt that someone was trying to threaten me. Then I asked them if there had been a murder in the town of Slumber, if that was really true, and they said yes. I said, By any chance was it the owner of a gas station? I told them that though I couldn't explain it, I thought the man who had committed that murder was here in the woods, and I was hiding from him right now. Speaking as softly as I could, I was able to tell them in general where I was, and then I stood against one of the rocks in Gargoyle Bend, my night vision getting ever better, and I stood and I waited, trying to breathe very softly. At one point, I wedged myself in between two of the other tall standing rocks, because it felt safer to press my body there, and I slowly lowered myself toward the ground, crouching.

Five minutes went by; my heart was beating out of control. It wouldn't stop. After ten minutes, I should have heard sounds, maybe a car engine or flashlights. But there was no one. Then as I crouched there, I heard something: leaves being crushed by footsteps. As the footsteps came a little bit closer, I slowly rose to a full standing height. My hand went out to the ground and clasped around a big thick rock that seemed the perfect size. It seemed like I was meant to hold it somehow. And I waited. Then I saw the shape of a man. He was about fifteen feet in front of me, walking toward me, and he stopped because he had seen me. I could see almost no details of his face. It was too dark. I heard his voice. Immediately it was clear that it was the same voice that I had heard back at the gas station.

This man said, 'Hello, I'm having trouble with my car back at my campsite. Can you help me?' For a moment I didn't answer, unable to think straight. Then I told him, 'Sure, I'm just out hiking. Why don't I call someone for you?' I held up my cellphone in my other arm, the one that wasn't holding the rock. I tapped it so that the light would come on, and so that he would see that I could call anyone in an instant, could reach the police just that fast. He said, 'No. Never mind. I was just hoping you would help me.' To this I said nothing. The tone of his voice changed a little

bit. I heard leaves crunch as he moved one step closer and stopped. He said, 'I bet that's your car, isn't it?' A jolt of adrenaline went through my body at that moment, and I committed to action. I took one step forward and raised my right hand, the one with the rock in it, and I let out a cry. I threw that rock as hard as I could right toward the man's face and I heard it strike right between his eyes with a sickening wet thud. I heard his breath expelling from his chest and he went down, backwards like a shot, hitting the ground, and I tore past him right at that moment back in the direction of my campfire.

My memory of the agonizing run back through the woods is strangely blank. They tell me now this is not out of the ordinary. I think at some point before I threw the rock, I had so convinced myself that I was going to die that my brain may have tried to protect me by attacking my memory. The next thing I remember was getting my keys out of the front of the car, running back to the trunk, slamming it shut, and seeing that there were now massive dents caused from within, where the man had somehow wrenched the hydraulic jack underneath upwards in his final, successful attempt to get out.

I got into the car, gunned the engine, and pulled out, getting quickly back onto the little dirt road that had led me there. I had to limit my speed to about thirty miles per hour to avoid skidding off the path into a tree. It was very tight maneuvering. With the high beams on I roared ever forward, looking for any sign of movement in the trees. I went about a mile, and by my calculations, Gargoyle Bend and the stream should have only been about 200 yards to my right. I slowed the car to walking speed. I fully expected the man to appear, to jump out in front of the car, staggering toward me with his face bloodied. I realized suddenly that my passenger's side door was completely unlocked. I reached over, slammed the lock down and kept on going. A little bit faster, a little bit faster.

I finally saw headlights coming the other way. It was a park ranger. Then came perhaps the darkest time of all; it was the time that they don't show you in the movies. It's right after the first help arrives, and you're waiting for the authorities to enter the scene in enough numbers to finally feel safe. You have a terrible feeling that it's not quite over. After I told the ranger what was happening, he urged me to get inside his truck and lock the door; I could wait in the back seat for him. I did, and he left the engine running, and he stood out there in the glow of his own headlights, talking into a walkie-talkie, peering into the woods. Standing there as calm he could be. I wanted to yell at him, *Let's get out of here! Let's get out of here! We aren't safe!* He seemed so very much in control. The sound of that engine running was like the clock ticking, and I was waiting for something awful to happen. I held my tongue, praying that nothing would come out of the woods. In the end, I got lucky.

Of course, I spent the entire next day with the police and was given all the information they had. The man from the gas station had been killed almost instantly by the rock I threw. His face had been mashed and bloodied beyond recognition. I had shattered his skull. Divine providence had saved my life and taken his. There were a lot of questions. It was two months ago now.

There was one thing that I wished they'd never told me, but maybe there was no way around me ever finding out. One of the detectives was talking to me about finding the body. It came out that the man had been holding something in his right hand as he stood there talking to me, baiting me there in the middle of the woods. Getting ready to kill me. But it wasn't a weapon. As he had stood there in the dark, he was holding in his right hand the head of the gas station owner, the head of the man he had so randomly decapitated. He'd had it all along there in the trunk with him, and he'd carried it with him into the woods when he went to find me.

west

My name is Lancaster Coolidge. I had ridden aimlessly across the west for two and a half years before I came to Bullock, Montana, which was just a low, cruel plain without anything to mark it or remember its certain, eventual demise. Two and a half years and I was tired to my bones, so tired that even a place like Bullock seemed desirable for a time of rest. I rode Lyndon there on an October day when a snowstorm seemed to be approaching, but thinking back, it never did come, not then anyway.

The sun had just gone down when I made my way along the town's biggest of its four musty streets. I tied Lyndon and went into a place called Morgan's Inn. I was the only one in there, it wasn't much of a bar. At least I was pleased to see a woman tending it. Her name was Eva. There wasn't much to do but drink their weak gin and be grateful for the fire, so we passed an hour, maybe two, talking. She walked some water out to Lyndon and was kind enough to drape a blanket over him. With the dark, it got bitterly cold.

She told me her story, I told her mine. I had not much money left, but she was able to recommend a very cheap room. There was work two towns over if I wanted it, but I wasn't even sure about that. She was too young to understand the weariness in the heart that comes with not seeing any good options, any paths that wouldn't demand more energy of spirit than I had anymore. She asked me if I was a churchgoing man; I said no. But I asked her about one I'd seen about five miles out, in the middle of the plain, all by itself, a ramshackle building, unmarked. Eva became quiet then. She said it was best not to ask many questions about that place, especially here in Bullock. That just made me more curious. She seemed to look around to make sure no one else was listening, as if anyone else had even come into the place since I had.

Four years before, the priest whose church that had been passed away, and the place had fallen into disrepair, neglected. Then one day someone saw a man ride in and explore it, and that man had never left. He'd never come as far as Bullock, nor had he ever entered Pisgah Town, as far as anyone knew. He moved into the tiny quarters behind the church and there he stayed. No one knew what the man was doing, but then, it wasn't often that someone went by. The road to the church had become so muddy and washed out that traders didn't take it anymore. What people gleaned from the goings-on there came from a view from the hills nearby, mostly.

One day in March, someone noticed that the sign outside the church had been re-lettered by hand. It announced that services would take place Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. But the pastor, if that's who the man was who had taken up residence there, did not add his name. No posters ever appeared in Bullock. So at first, nobody went to the church. No one. The terrible condition of the road, the strangeness of the man living alone, the deep roots that were there with the previous pastor... it put people off, so they simply did not go.

Eva had been out that way one night, she was evasive about why. I sensed it was because she was with someone she wasn't supposed to be. But she said it had been on a Thursday, and it was dark out, and she'd watched as the lamps were lit inside the church, and she'd seen the man begin to hold a service. But it was obvious he was the only one inside the place. Eva said he could be seen speaking from the pulpit to rows of empty pews. He wore a priest's collar and

spoke so loudly that even from far away, Eva thought she could hear his voice carried to her by the wind. He seemed to be about fifty years old, very thin, pale.

As weeks passed, people in Bullock began to talk about this priest who held services whether anyone showed up or not, and to everyone's knowledge—no one ever had. Sometimes someone would ride by on a Sunday and consider entering, but move on. The people who had begun to go to services in Pisgah Town after Father Umney had died kept on with their new church rather than return to the one some had known since they were children. And out on the plain, the priest lit the lamps three times a week and spoke his sermons to no one. He had never set foot in Bullock, it was said, but it wasn't clear where he got his rations or stores. He had three animals with him and he tended to them, but that couldn't have been enough to subsist on.

And then, after a time, the reason no one went to church was less about inconvenience and unfamiliarity as it was about superstition. Some people said the priest must be mad, but when you mentioned him in Bullock, you were just as likely to hear the word 'haunted.' People stayed away because the priest and his strange compulsion to relentlessly perform services in an empty church frightened people. He would be there tomorrow afternoon, Eva said, for his Tuesday service, and if you got close enough, as some had, you'd be able to hear his booming voice teaching the Gospel, just as he had hundreds of times now.

It didn't seem possible to me that no one, *no one* had even spoken to this man, but Eva believed it to be true. I said *Well, I believe I may have to speak to him myself*, and at this suggestion Eva's eyes went wide and her generosity went cold. *Please don't think about that*, she said, and to be kind, I assured her I was only joking. I had heard stranger tales in the past two and a half years of wandering, yes. I had met a blind woman who could mimic any voice so perfectly it sent chills down the spine, and I'd heard of a man who burst into flames as he was taken the gallows to be hanged. But this story compelled me in a way I couldn't really describe. I thought about it all night in my lonely bed at Storch's Guest Rooms. And then I dreamed about it.

After so many days and weeks and months of having nothing to obligate me to even rise in the morning, I was anxious to ride out to the church, if only out of a sense of mystery. I bode my time in Bullock by playing cards with a man reeking of whiskey, and at three o'clock I mounted Lyndon and we rode out as Bullock settled into its usual late afternoon stupor. I saw only two people on the streets as I left, a man and woman bickering over the weather-proofing of their house as they walked along, eyeing me suspiciously.

My memory didn't serve me very well as I made my way out to the church, and I got disoriented not once but twice. How my mind had atrophied without challenges, without ambitions, without desires, but that is what war can do to you.

I'll say nothing more about my past. I believe it was exactly half past three when I saw the church in the distance. A half hour till services, apparently. There was no sun that day, the sky was a nasty gray. Lyndon and I stood looking down on the place, and after about fifteen minutes, the priest emerged from his one-room shack. He shooed a pig away from the front door and for a time he merely gazed at the sky above him, his back straight, his neck craned back. I could just see that he wore a clerical collar. He entered the church and I rode Lyndon closer to it, very slowly. Eva had been right about the road; it had become almost impassable marsh in places, so we avoided it.

And yes, I did spy glimpses of the priest through the filthy windows, lighting the lamps. And then, I did hear him speak, though I never got to within less than fifty yards of the place. The sound carried on the wind. He was reciting a passage from I don't know what part of the Bible, all alone. His voice was full of bass and unusual power. He spoke as if his audience was in the hundreds. It was hypnotic. I had to force myself to turn away. I had established nothing more than that Eva's tale was true.

Dreams of the church came to me each night for the next three as I began my sad existence in the forgotten town of Bullock, playing cards, reading, tending to my old friend Lyndon, and drinking when I knew Eva would be at Morgan's Inn. I preferred talking to her to the few other patrons. Out of respect for her I didn't mention the church again, and talked of other things. If she and I ever had a chance to become more than customer and barkeep, I try not to think about it. It seemed neither one of us had enough of a fire inside us to pursue it, though I am still young, and she was only twenty-four. Something must have happened to her, long ago, I think now. I have a sense for that.

On Saturday at dusk, I stopped at Morgan's Inn for bourbon just before heading out of town for the evening. Eva seemed to know as soon as I walked in what I had planned. *Don't go there*, she pleaded me. I tried to explain that it could be my last chance to find what I needed. I had never accepted the Lord, but maybe that one voice could bring me to that place, a voice as lonely as I myself had been since I'd left the army. Maybe one man who was like me, speaking to me like a brother, someone who possibly needed me... maybe that was my chance to perceive the high ground and the glory. When I left her I pressed two dollars into her palm, and I felt that her hand was shaking.

The wind battered me as I rode north, finding my way carefully in the dark, never urging Lyndon to more than a trot. He had stuck by me for so long, and now he was developing a weak leg and a strong dislike for the cold. The sky was clear, the stars were brilliant.

I got more confused than I thought and I wound up approaching the church from due south. All I could see as I moved closer was its tall entrance, shut tight against the cold. The only way I could tell the lights were aglow was by the fog they put out through the side windows.

I tied Lyndon and I walked slowly to the tall doors, and I hesitated. I listened for any movement inside, but I couldn't sense any. I saw Eva's face in my mind. And then came my mother's face, a vision whose origin baffled and frightened me. I hadn't thought of her for a long, long time. And in my mind she was crying. *Momma*, I thought, *why are you crying, I'm going to church, finally, I'm going to church*. But at these words she turned away.

I pushed the doors inward. The tiny church was indeed fully lit. But I was not alone. Not at all. The pews were filled with people. None turned to note my entrance. They faced the pulpit where the tall, skinny priest stood, ready to begin. But where had the people come from? For there were no horses tied outside other than Lyndon, none.

I took a seat at the very back, trying to be silent and respectful. The priest began the service. He spoke of how hard life could be, whether one was a farmer, a doctor, a prospector, a soldier. We created such lofty goals, all of us, to distract us from the only one that mattered in the end: the desire for peace at the close of that long journey. Peace that was here, in the house of God, for those willing to submit. How lonely it was, and how foreign was every town on every dusty

plain for those who turned away, who would not accept the light. The priest asked for a moment of quiet in which each parishioner asked him or herself: *Am I resisting? Is it not time for me to go?*

But when the silence began, the parishioners didn't bow their heads. They turned, all of them, to the back of the church, to me. Their eyes locked on me. None of the faces were familiar. None of them held friendship, love, or comfort.

If you will not rest, sir, the priest said from the pulpit, if you insist on going on, we must at least have your animal.

It was a demand and a threat, and I was not strong enough to resist entirely.

And so I got up and left the church alone, leaving Lyndon behind, Lyndon who had been so faithful, even to the moment when an enemy bullet felled him underneath me two thousand miles away from Bullock, two and a half months before. I walked away leaving him hitched. Yes, they could have Lyndon. But not me. I was exhausted and depleted to the marrow of my spine, but I was not ready for death itself, no matter how deeply they may have buried my broken corpse in Mexico on the day the bullets had struck me too.

I walked toward the west all night, freezing, hungry, and having no reason to go on, but go on I will until someone more powerful than that priest emerges to overcome me. Sometimes I think the longer I resist the very end, the more sinister that someone will be, and the darker the place he will take me. Here I am in Idaho now, in this small town called Proud. I grow weaker by the day, and there are moments when it seems the people on the street do not even see or hear me. But death itself cannot have me.

I don't want to die. Can you understand that? Here, friend, let me buy you a whiskey, and we can sit by the fire, and discuss it. I want to ask you again: *Can you understand?*

Let No One Walk Beside Her

Sometimes I stare at the texture of the bricks in the little wall beside the ridge. I look at the fish in Lillithorn Brook, so familiar I could give them names. I study the rain that collects in the barrel behind the stable. I try to see the change in any of it since this madness came over the world. Somewhere, something in the earth must show the signs of where it came from. But it is as if the earth could not be bothered to leave one word of testament as we are murdered and our blood slips away.

– from the diary of a farmer living in the territory known as Agathold.

On the 17th night of the Year of the Yellow Horse, a weary young woman stumbled out of Novembra Pass west of the Valmy Mountains and toward the tiny light she saw in the window of a darkened cabin. The weather was freezing and wet. Six inches of snow had fallen since midday. The woman was on the verge of starvation, and suffering the effects of a rat bite on her left ankle. For a time as she struggled along, limping badly, feverish, she hallucinated that the light was coming from the heavens above her. Only when she felt the arm of another human being—the first she had encountered in two weeks of desperate foot travel—did she understand that she was temporarily safe.

She knew herself only by her first name: Hanth. She was nineteen years old. Her savior was an enfeebled old man named Cedroa Vanten. He'd barely been able to lift his bulk from his chair in the remote cabin that was not his own, but he had sensed someone out there in the awful night and summoned the strength to rise.

He shared what little bread he had with Hanth, gave her tea, and rewrapped her frozen fingers. When she had recovered her senses, she told him she had been a novitiate at the Green Convent ninety miles away. Vanten himself had been bishop of Gladden, in the time before the singers of songs had claimed the land.

Hanth told Vanten that the singers of songs had overrun the convent at the end of spring. All twenty of the sisters there had been slaughtered. Since then, she had been on her own. Her goal was to cross the Dragma Mountains, beyond which some believed there was safety. But Vanten assured her that if she did not make it over that forbidding range by the time the snows arrived there, she would certainly freeze in them. Perhaps she might take shelter for the winter in the old abandoned logging camp at their foot. But more likely, she was simply too late.

The girl and I prayed together well into the night, but her words sounded so very empty, like a windup doll made to speak them. Her soul was not given over to them.

Her plan is not sane. How sad it makes me, that she should cling to this life so when such glory awaits us in the kingdom of heaven.

– from the diary of Cedroa Vanten.

The old man told me about how his wife renounced the Creator before she died. He found her after the singers of songs had come. They'd taken all of her. They took her eyes. They took her hands. He said it comforted him to know he would soon go exactly the same way that she did, that he will share that with her.

– from the diary of Hanth.

He had been waiting in this cabin, he said, not moving, for almost nine days, and so the singers almost certainly had his scent by now, and would be coming for him. After praying together one last time, Hanth left him the very next morning, still heavily favoring her left leg, still sick in her lungs, still hungry for any scrap.

Vanten told her he did not fear death. *Thank you Creator*, for everything, he wrote. Thank you for this unexpected shelter. *Thank you for the bird that came to my window*. He gave Hanth a handful of nuts to take with her, and then she trudged onward, toward the west through the newly fallen snow, close to death but refusing to surrender to it.

She asked me whether her path would take her towards the Captus River. I told her there was another source of water and that was not the greatest of her concerns, but she asked me again. I wonder what business she has there.

It was a thirty-four mile walk to the valley at the base of the Dragma Mountains. The terrain was filled with densely huddled trees and blind ridges, challenging rises and slow curving descents. Hanth walked the ghostly remains of the only road that had ever been built in the region, and she lost her way several times. She tried to think of nothing: not her past, not the future, not the Creator. Some of her toes had become discolored and painful, and she had developed a deep, ripping cough. Her thin coat had never been meant for exposure to the harsh lands beyond the convent. She walked each day until she could go no further, and then collapsed under trees and tried to write in a tattered diary with pages held together with two old shoelaces.

On the third night she awoke to the feel of a great black bird half as tall as she was tearing viciously at her shoe, and she kicked it away frantically, her angry shouts echoing through the forest around her.

When she came to the mountains, she beheld the task in front of her under a swirling gray sky. She had only the word of two strangers she had encountered that Marylis was a place safe from the singers of songs. But she felt she had no choice but to press on. It was not even known to her how long her journey would have to be.

For a full day she felt herself moving upwards, having to rest much more often than normal. At times it took her two hours to slog a single mile, using a branch as a cane. Always there was the knowledge that winter was coming fast, and with it, no chance of going forward.

I came awake last night because the earth seemed to be moving all around me. I looked down from atop the rock on which I'd lain and saw below the figures of wolves, rushing past in a pack. Then I heard an animal being overtaken and torn down, crying in pain. It would have been me if I had not been on higher ground.

Hanth ate the nuts that had been given to her but felt herself weakening fast. Sometimes the air was so cold that eating snow for its moisture became difficult, and painful on her shriveled tongue. Once, she was simply knocked over by the wind, and when she rose, she realized she had passed out for the better part of an hour.

Her final choice was made for her. The snows came early to the Dragma Mountains. When the first inch had fallen around her, Hanth turned and began to follow her footprints back the way she had come, in a panic. Soon those prints had disappeared under the new powder. When she was too exhausted to move forward a single step, she slept with the snow collecting on her

prone body, and had to free her legs from it when she awoke. By the time she detoured to the south and came across the old logging camp Vanten had spoken of, she was crawling on her hands and knees, which only made the torture on her fingers more intense. The snow had mercifully stopped; another few inches of it and she would have been immobilized.

She made her way into a tiny shack among a loose ring of them, and fell into a deep sleep. Outside, another foot and a half of snow would fall just twelve hours after she got to safety, beginning a cycle of storms that would pin her down for the winter.

It has been thirty-five nights since I came to this camp. The lake is so deeply frozen over now that it takes a whole day to chip away enough to reach water. The birds provide enough game, and I have enough matches still so that I can eat every three days.

I stole the matches from the convent. We were preparing to move. We'd heard what the singers of songs do before they make their true sound. There was a plan. Mother Dwyer had a map. But then she became very quiet and gave us all tea. One by one, the sisters began to fall asleep. I never drank mine. I watched her as she drank too. They were all asleep when I went into the woods.

I took what I believed I had to.

The shack Hanth lived in had nothing more than a cot and stove. There were seven such shacks in the clearing. On some days the snow was so deep that she wasn't able to see the other ones at all. Afraid to keep the few birds and squirrels she was able to trap and kill inside the shack for fear of the starving grapple bears which roamed the forest, she tried to keep the food tied to nearby trees, but on more than one night she heard the wet grunting sounds that meant the food would be gone when she next awoke. She wrote in her diary that one of the fingers on her left hand seemed to be dead from the cold, and she had terrible incapacitating headaches. There was nothing she could do but wait for spring, saving matches only to cook her food no matter how brutal the winter became.

In all that time, she wrote, the sun broke through the clouds only once. And on that day, she saw something just outside the camp that she never could have expected. A man was lying against a tree, new snow covering his legs. He was staring blankly into space and seemed unaware of Hanth as she approached. While he himself did not seem wounded, his clothing was covered in blood.

Hanth crouched beside him and stayed with him until he seemed to regain awareness. Little by little he came to, and she was able to help him to his feet. Over the course of an hour, she got him into one of the unused shacks.

By nightfall the man was speaking and coherent. His name was Father Corvus Junian. He was a stocky man born with only one ear. He recognized Hanth immediately, having come to the Green Convent twice to bring potatoes to the sisters back before the time of the singers of songs.

He had come from the west ridge of Spruce Nigh, fifteen miles away. He had been among a group of ten men who had split into two camps, on each of the area's two highest ridges, keeping

watch for weeks. One night, the other camp's agreed-upon fire signal had never appeared. Junian's men had been too frightened to even go to them.

The singers came for them soon after. He told Hanth that if he looked at the bloodstains on his clothing, he could remember exactly whose blood was whose.

Junian was a severe man, distant and distracted. He became angry with Hanth when she informed him that she had not moved from the camp for so long. By doing so, he said, she had all but assured the singers would soon come. Only the snow had likely slowed them. He produced a withered map from his coat and spread it out on the dirt floor beneath their feet. Hanth crouched down and Junian explained her situation to her, drawing lines in pencil.

He had come south from Treague. Fishermen there had escaped through the valley to the east when they'd heard the singing, leaving a single note on a tree as a guide for anyone who might come later. No one had ever heard from them again. Two weeks before, the only reachable village in the southwest had been taken by the singers, every man, woman and child killed. The Dragma Mountains to the west were now blocked off; Marylis could not be reached. In essence, they were now encircled.

I told him that if there were a four day period between the snows, we could attempt another climb. He said there would be no food and no water through the pass, that this camp was the only place a human being could survive. But now that he is here, the scent is that much stronger to them.

I have only four more matches. He said it would take us seven days to cross the mountains at a killing pace. He told me if I died before him, he would eat me to survive. He said I needed to understand that. I returned to my shack late at night.

This girl is strange. She seems unafraid of what may happen in the mountains. She does not pray. Neither do I. They should have come for her and killed her by now. It makes no sense.

We have an understanding that we'll begin to walk the moment this new storm passes. In the shack across the camp from hers, I removed my clothes for the first time in a long, long time. Two bloodied teeth fell from my cuff where they must have lodged during the attack on the camp. I threw them out into the snow. It's risen almost to my waist. These might be my final words.

They began to walk at dawn, struggling at first even to reach the trail that Hanth had already followed. Father Junian carried a steel blade and Hanth possessed a short-handled chopping axe she'd found in one of the shacks at the camp. These were their only means of self-defense, and they meant nothing against the elements.

For a full day they made slow progress into the mountains. They never spoke. When night fell, they built a fire and stared into its embers rather than speak to each other. Sleep came very late, as tending to the flames required constant effort in the wind. After two or three hours of fitful rest, they were off again.

In the gray light of early morning they stopped to watch a gathering of cave vultures flying overhead. Hanth saw that two of them were carrying prey off to the north. The vultures, capable

of carrying ten times their own weight, held something more valuable than owls or foxes in their long talons. One struggled to carry its burden. It was the upper torso and head of a child, the other half of the body missing. There was no way of telling from which direction the vultures had truly come, or when an attack had conveniently left them with such an easy reward.

The journey seemed to become doomed on the second day. The winds had risen, blowing the snow cover through the trees with such intensity that sometimes neither Hanth nor Junian could see more than two feet in front of them. A long hill rose before them, one so gradual and so steep that it took more than an hour to move a quarter of a mile. Even five consecutive steps left Hanth gasping for breath and having to rest. Waves of faintness washed over her constantly. They had measured out their food with great care and refused to deviate from those rations.

When the whipping snow began to come at Junian at an almost horizontal angle because of the wind, he closed his eyes and tried to advance that way. At one point he was obstructed by a fallen tree. In climbing over it, he slipped and slammed his chin on the frozen wood. His leg became caught in a dead vine and he twisted his ankle so badly they were forced to stop where they were for three hours. Junian coughed in sickly fits and spoke at length to a woman who was not there. When his delirium passed, he made no excuse for it.

Though circumstances dictated they huddle together for warmth at night in the face of the gales sweeping over the mountains, they instead kept away from each other. Father Junian made sure of it. There was something about Hanth he had come to fear, some look in her eyes that made her seem far older than her nineteen years, capable of a strength that didn't seem to come from her small broken body. Her curious determination scared him. He felt she was hiding some secret he didn't want to know.

At dawn of the third day, after only twenty minutes of walking, the two of them came to a clearing. There they found the most awful sight. Seven women, whose manner of dress under their insufficient coats told them they were of the sisterhood of Pliency Monastery, lay dead in the snow. Animals had been at them, not just once but many times, but had not taken away as much as they could have, almost as if they had attempted to offer a primitive kind of respect for their piety. Sometime since Hanth had first come through, the sisters had frozen to death making their own way through the mountains. In their last extremity, they had tried to commit an act of charity for those who might come afterward. They had seemingly agreed to lay down end to end, forming a rough line, each stretching out a single arm that pointed toward a path through the woods that would perhaps have been missed by someone less careful than Hanth. As it was, their gesture was wasted on her. Junian looked in Hanth's eyes and saw neither revulsion nor pity, only the desire to move on.

But they would not move on. Cresting a hill, they could see far into the distance. The sky they beheld was a terrifying one, painted thickly with gray thunderheads that stretched across the horizon, as if an entire roiling ocean were hovering above the earth. That night, or more likely the next one, there would be a great and terrible snowfall.

There was little hesitation in their decision to turn back. Death seemed an absolute certainty if they proceeded. There had been too many omens, both real and imagined. And so they made their way back in each other's footprints, not speaking of their despair. They knew they would have to endure the blizzard, that their pace could not possibly outrun it, but they hoped their luck would carry them just enough to a point where Hanth had identified a rock formation which might act as a natural cave.

They made it. That was where they spent hours waiting for the snow to come. When it did, a new fear gripped them: that they would be buried alive in the cave by the growing drifts. They spent hours clawing the snow away with their bare hands while desperately trying to keep their small fire alive.

I cannot write anymore of that night. I cannot write of how we made it back to camp. I remember it only in pieces that do not combine to make any sort of sense. Some of it is gone entirely. But I remember the moment before we began our descent. Looking back at the sisters lying dead in the snow, I know that I saw that one of them had moved. Turned over. Still alive. I cared for that fact no more than I cared that my fingernails have grown long. We walked on. The girl was either unaware or past empathy, like me.

I remained in this shack for three days while the snow piled up. The girl did the same in hers. I would not call what I did sleep. It was more like a fever dream. My body felt made of spun glass. I ate the last of my food. It happened again that I could not leave after the snow stopped, for it had risen above my head.

When I was finally able to get out, I took the girl's pack and crossed the camp to her shack. During the storm we had switched our packs without knowing, so far beyond reason we had become.

Hanth was still alive, though hunger had sunken her eyes so that Father Junian wrote she looked no different than the dead and mauled sisters out there on the mountain. Hanth asked him what would happen if they were to walk directly east, avoiding Novembra Pass. The course she described traversed the Goathead Gorge, where it was said one could not see through the constant mist ten steps ahead. Not even grass grew there for two hundred miles.

She asked again where the Captus River began, and I asked her what business she had there...

That was when he told me to stay away from him, to not come near him ever again. He had gone through my sack. He knew why it was that the singers had not yet overtaken us. He had found the Enismata. I confessed that I had discovered it in the crypts beneath the convent. He called me accursed, damned forever, and then he left.

None can have mercy on that foul thing's soul now. She carries the Enismata. To even look into her eyes would mean something worse than death.

They existed for a time across the camp from another in a state of living death. It would be still four more weeks before the thaw came. As soon as it was humanly possible, Hanth left her shack and trudged her way to the lake a mile away. There she spent a full day probing the ice for signs of fish, and crouching beside a tree in silence, waiting for any sort of animal to appear, in the hope of tracking it, striking it with her short axe or even a stone, lunging for it. Most often these missions resulted in her returning to the camp empty-handed, exhausted from the mental effort it took to maintain her awareness of the forest's sounds and signs. On this day, she was able to kill a single skullbird. Into her pack with the cloth-wrapped Enismata it went, and before the light began to fade from the sky, she made her way back.

Before she parted the trees and entered camp, she stopped in her tracks at a ghastly sight which, in her condition, had taken far too long to fully materialize. The snow around Father Junian's shack was streaked with red for a dozen yards in almost every direction. After Hanth had gone on the hunt, he had at some point emerged from the shack, perhaps to find food of his own. His diary made no mention of his intentions. A giant grappler bear stood near his door now, head low, its jaws working to eat the remains of its kill.

Junian's body had been torn into pieces. Hanth could see his head and torso several feet away while the bear chewed on one of his severed legs, which it had dragged several yards away into a clearer patch of snow. Junian's death must have been violent and agonizing. It was not the first time a grappler had approached the camp, but now one had finally attacked, driven most likely by its own desperate hunger.

When the bear rose from the snow and began to turn, Hanth instinctively collapsed into a small drift beside a tree to stay unseen. She tried to control her breathing and move not an inch. She heard the bear snort and moan forty yards away. Afraid to shift or turn her head, she could only wait for it to go away.

For the better part of an hour, the light faded from the sky above her. The wind blew snow off high branches down onto her face, and she could only blink it away. When the sky had taken on the deep blue tinge of twilight, she became aware of a sharp smell nearby, and she heard the bear grunt. It had never left the area, and it had now ventured beyond the camp into the trees.

I imagined I could smell the blood on its mouth. This is what blood smells like, I thought, and thought it over and over and over again. I heard its footsteps, getting closer. It would stop, and I could hear it panting as it tried to understand where the human scent was coming from.

Hanth decided that at the sound of the bear's very next step, she would close her eyes for good and feign death, her only defense. But that step never seemed to come. It was full dark when she dared lift her head over the snow and peer through the gloom. The grappler was lying on its side just twenty feet away from her. It was dead. She knew at once that the power she had acquired via the Enismata had protected her.

She made her way toward her shack, averting her eyes from Junian's remains. She was not even at her door when over the wind the sound came which had been weeks in arriving. So far in the distance that it wasn't even possible to tell from which direction it came, there emerged a rhythmic clapping, not of one pair of hands but perhaps dozens, constant, never getting nearer or farther away, seeming to defy the acoustics of the forest. She clasped her own hands to her

ears, shutting it out. All her choices had finally been made for her. The time had come for one last effort at escape to another place.

She put whatever she could into her sack and crossed the camp. She could not proceed without Father Junian's map, and so she had to move directly through the spot where he had been slaughtered, trying to keep her eyes on the rising moon. The clapping sound was ceaseless. She was finally able to determine that it was coming from the north and west.

She spent a few minutes studying the map and going through Junian's possessions in search of food or any sort of weapon, yet he had neither. His steel blade was inexplicably gone. She put snow into her mouth to gain whatever moisture she could from it, and then she left, headed directly east, needing rest badly but unable to even entertain the notion. She would push herself until she broke.

As she knew they would, the sounds that the singers created remained a constant throughout the night. They knew not to come too close, not yet, not until their feeding was assured. Because of what she carried, Hanth was indeed a different sort of prey now. Her legs carried her forward on into dawn, when she lost consciousness.

The clapping brought her back to it with a new sky overhead. She consulted the map again and again, knowing that whoever who had drawn it, working with only primitive knowledge, had of course misrepresented the terrain. What lay off the Novembra Pass was an unknown, but even an inaccurate map assured her that hers was the swiftest course to the Captus River.

She came across it almost by accident. Deep and dangerous, it had never frozen over. There was no crossing the Captus, but that had never been Hanth's intention. The moment she reached a hand out to break its bone-chilling surface, something happened. The clapping sounds from the forest stopped. The woods became utterly silent again, without echo. She knew the singers had not retreated and were only waiting, sensing from afar.

In that moment, she knew that Father Junian had been right about her. She was accursed. She removed the Enismata from her pack, unwrapped the strands of cloth which she had sacrificed from the layer around her fingers, and immersed it in the waters of the Captus River, where in the Year of the Titan four centuries before, two frenzied armies had crossed a sheet of ice to attack each other with a bloodlust so intense, it was written that no man had survived, filling the river with thousands of corpses. She set the Enismata aside, waited several minutes, and then plunged her entire arm into the river, feeling as if her heart might suddenly stop. When the frigid pain had reached a level of intensity that threatened to black her out, she just barely felt an unseen object make contact with her open palm. With great effort she was able to clasp the thing tightly and pull her numb arm out of the water again.

In her hand she now inexplicably held a different one. Severed at the wrist. So old it had become blackened and mummified, two fingers gone. This object too she placed into her pack. And then her run from the now-silent singers continued.

Hanth made her way along the banks of the Captus and rejoined the trail that had originally taken her toward the logging camp. Her journey ended with the sight of a tiny light she saw in the window of a now-familiar dark cabin.

My body has become unrecognizable to me. It has long been eating itself, but still somehow I function.

The old man, Vanten, hung himself some time ago. It is so cold inside the cabin that his body is perfectly preserved. He did not wait for death to come to him. He went to it. I cut him down and put him out into the snow and sat down to write in this diary.

A quarter of an hour ago, the clapping began again, much closer now. It is midday. The sky is gray and terrible. There will be another storm. For all I know, it waited because of me. That is the power I possess in the sack at my feet. One more hour at most, and it will be time to use it.

The clapping sounds came again, for the last time, so close that Hanth knew the singers of songs were just beyond the treeline behind the cabin. She removed the chopping axe from her pack and propped herself against a wall, sitting on the cold dirt floor. She grasped the Enismata in her left hand, and using strips of rags torn from the shirt of the dead man lying outside in the snow, she bound her hand around it tightly. It is not known whether the singers appeared to her before or after she raised the axe high over her head and brought it down again and again onto her left wrist.

They came forward through the trees all around the cabin, finally emboldened enough to come for the strange woman who emanated a power they did not understand. If there was fear among them, no one would ever know. It was only when Hanth saw them that they would have begun to sing in the manner that had driven even brave soldiers insane, but upon coming across the scene, pikemen from Oakenarr swore they found no dead wildlife in the area, so it is likely they truly never did. Perhaps the rhythmic clapping of their hands was their only message.

When Hanth emerged from the cabin, leaving a spatter of blood behind her that stretched all the way to the door, the left hand she had been born with nineteen years before was gone, but in its place was a mummified male hand twice as large as her own had been. It had become one with her body sometime in the lost moments when she had become unconscious. The priests of Novembra write of what she was certainly forced to endure at its will in those moments, where the hand explored, unwelcome and savage.

The singers came, in uncertain rows and columns, their tiny bare feet struggling through the snow. The largest of them was perhaps three feet tall. Theirs were the arms, feet, hands, and heads of children. They possessed no eyes, no ears. Small toothless mouths could form no words, only a discordant music. Their fingers were long enough to surround a grown man's neck, and tapered at their ends. They took no food from the woods around them, needed no rest.

When the closest of them came near enough, Hanth raised her left arm to the sky. The black and white snowscape was suddenly lit by orange and yellow bursts of flame. Several of the dozens upon dozens of singers spontaneously caught fire. Then more of them, each engulfed with a sound like a tree branch thudding into the deep snow beneath it, and then a strangely animal-like cry of dismay. Fire ate them whole, and yet in perishing they clapped on, slamming their palms together, fingernails like thorns connecting with each other.

Hanth's arm remained aloft, stretching upwards. Within seconds, all of the singers had caught fire. They stopped marching forward only when the flames ate through their legs. Little by little,

the clapping died out. All around Hanth, the forest was specked with fire and smoke. She smelled burning flesh and roasting blood.

I have returned to the cabin. They are all gone. The hand has protected me. For how long, I do not know. It itches. It wants more. Outside their bodies are black, the snow is black. I see bones and fingers and heads burned away only partly. Night is coming.

Hanth's diary ends there. Her fate was pieced together from what others found inside and outside the cabin in the spring, as well as the words describing the power of the Enismata, which were etched on a scroll in the crypts beneath the Green Convent, a scroll Hanth may never have seen.

The story told itself very clearly. Perhaps the very moment after Hanth had retreated to safety and written her last words, she felt a sudden and all-devouring heat erupt in her lower legs. She would have had perhaps two seconds to understand what was happening to her. She would have had time to think about nothing but the pain before her legs caught fire inside the cabin. It would have been impossible not to scream. From her legs the fire spread upward at unnatural speed. Her arms and head were last to be swallowed by flame. She ran forward and threw herself headfirst into the glass of the cabin's only window in a blind attempt to reach the snow outside, but her fate was set.

What remained of her in the thaw was nothing more than a collection of lonely bones found under the collapsed, charred remains of the cabin. These were wordlessly buried in the shade of a mist-soaked ridge three miles to the east.

I have had dreams in which we are people of the distant past, spoken of in pity for what we endured. In others, this is all happening centuries in the future. When I awake, I am not sure which I should believe. I only want to sleep again, where none of this is real.

Sleep, please come before the night does.

– from the diary of a farmer living in the territory known as Agathold.

car

I still think about the car all the time. And I can't believe that everything that happened with it happened within seven days.

On September 8th, 2002, I went to the funeral for an old co-worker of mine, someone I barely knew really. I went out of courtesy more than anything else. It was this guy I used to work with long time ago at a dairy farm. He had been killed in a hit and run accident two days before. They hadn't been able to find the guy, or a whole lot of evidence frankly.

So I went to this thing and I just shook a bunch of hands of people I hadn't seen for a lot of years. I was specifically trying to not get too many details about what happened. As I walked away from the grave my attention was drawn by something: It was the sound of a suffering engine. I looked down a hill, and down near the cremation garden, sitting there idling on a path, was an old car.

It was completely average, maybe a fifteen, twenty year-old junker. But there was something unusual about it. It took me a minute to realize just what it was from my distance: The paint job was all wrong. It looked, I swear, like someone had done this car in gray housepaint. It was wildly uneven; you could see strange streaks in it. I was so high up that from my angle, I couldn't see who was inside. It just sat there rumbling, and my only thought was, *Who here is getting in that thing?* It turned out nobody. Everyone was walking in the other direction, and eventually I did too.

That was on a Monday. On Thursday just past dusk, a rainstorm came into the area and it snarled the tail end of rush hour really bad. Even the back road I usually took out of the city was clogged up. The rain was torrential for a good forty-five minutes or so before it showed signs of tapering off. Then the traffic just stopped and it stayed that way, one of those epic backups that was obviously caused by some accident. Here came two ambulances from behind me, and there were sirens from the other direction.

I'd been sitting there inching along for what seemed like forever but then people started getting out of their cars entirely, always a sign we'd just have to dig in. I stayed in mine, but at one point in time I rolled down the window and poked my head out a little, trying not to get soaked. And a guy up ahead jogged over. He said somebody on foot had been hit and it was really bad. It had happened on a side road but they'd had to quickly seal off the intersection up ahead. You could see the red glare of all those emergency vehicles far, far ahead. I closed my eyes and put the car in park and tried to relax.

Fifteen minutes later we began inching along again and I got to looking around. Off on the right there was a used car lot I had seen hundreds of times, a row of cars with prices taped up on the windshields, sitting in the dark. But in the middle of that row there was one that didn't have a price. The license plate caught my eye: out of state, letters YYG. When I looked closer I could see that the car's headlights were actually on, but the lamps were so weak you could barely tell. Because I was only moving forward a few yards at a time, I had time for all the details to come into focus. And I knew I was looking at the car, the one I had seen at the funeral a few days before.

The paint job didn't produce those little glints that a normal one would in the passive light of the carpet place in the next lot. It looked so different even to the naked eye. I couldn't see any detail through the windshield or the windows no matter what angles emerged as I moved.

I didn't take my eyes off that car. Finally, I had to move on. The detour had been set up and things were getting clear. I saw at least five police cars blocking off Dordress Avenue but we were veered far around the scene.

And like the killing of my old co-worker, the police wouldn't find any paint at all on the victim's body, none. Strange.

Then came the next Monday. More thunderstorms came into the area, even a tornado warning as it got toward dusk. I was driving back up toward the city from a survey site out in the middle of nowhere, and I came over a rural hill and the sky just up ahead of me was the scariest one I'd ever seen—not just black with thunderheads; there were three huge vertical wisps coming down that to me looked like they could develop into something truly destructive.

The wind was picking up and I was speeding down a two-lane county highway just trying to get to the nearest town so I could pull off and wait out whatever was coming. I almost got caught in a speed trap. There was a cop car just off the shoulder in the trees off to the right, and then there was another one three miles down. Same thing, a cop car hiding a little trying to catch people on this lonely straightaway. And I got mad thinking that should have been the least of their worries with this storm coming.

I figured I was safe after that second trap so I picked my speed up, and by now leaves and grass were kicking up and hitting the windshield. The rain was coming fast. I spotted a third trap up ahead, and I actually slapped the steering wheel in anger as I took my foot off the gas, but it wasn't a cop car. It was the one.

I knew it right away, I could tell it by the license plate. It was facing out toward the road. It didn't move as I went past, didn't come out from its place just off the road.

I watched for the very next turnoff, always checking the rearview mirror. I took a left onto something called Kilkenny Road and went past a couple of farms. Then I heard a huge thunderclap, and I had gotten unlucky because as the rains started, Kilkenny Road turned into a single lane with no divider. Cracking pavement, trees close on the side, squeezing out what tiny bit of daylight was left.

I made another turn but the road wasn't any better, so I pulled over onto the nonexistent shoulder and shut the engine off. The storm hit, and it got so bad so fast that I couldn't even see through the rear windshield to tell if anything had followed me. I was powerless. I was afraid the trees all around me would shed branches on to the car. Nothing I could do but wait and hope it wouldn't get any worse.

Thankfully it didn't. Whatever was above me in the sky broke apart just past dark. And then there was nothing but a steady hard rain when the winds fell.

I got moving again, and since there was no good place to turn around I pinned my hopes on another left turn to get me back to the main road. But it just took me further into nowhere, winding and twisting. And at one point the little road was just washed out, a gully of water in front of me. So I had to back up a hundred yards and take some poorly marked right turn. I was in an aggravating maze of woods roads that were probably unmaintained by the county, used only by hunters maybe.

It was dark and I was scared, scared of seeing headlights ahead of me and that car in motion. And then up on the left there was an object, just off the road in the tall grass: a ten-speed bicycle lying on its side and its rear wheel noticeably askew in the frame. Motionless.

I stopped in the middle of the road, threw the car in park and rolled the window down. What did that bike mean? I decided I had to get out and look around, but I was trembling. When I put my hand on the door handle, one thought raced through my mind, which was, *Don't do it. Don't get out of the car. It feels ridiculous to be frightened, but how many people felt ridiculous and so they didn't do the safest thing and it killed them. Don't get out of the car.*

Pure shameful cowardice. Ahead and behind me the road was dark, no visibility. On my right was a big open field sloping upward, upward as it went into the distance, farmland with no farmhouse in sight. Swirling clouds against the sky which was the color of dark sea.

And there it was. There was the car sitting in the field a hundred yards away. It was facing away from the road, no lights on, like it was trying to fool me.

I threw my car in drive and I hit the gas. The straightaway ahead of me was very long and I was up to thirty-five miles an hour before I didn't dare go any faster. The visibility was so bad, the road so badly maintained. I took a guess on a turn and the new road was bigger and safer.

Still nothing in my rearview mirror, and just a mile away there was Route 40. I turned right with only the barest glance to what I was merging into, and then I was on a four-lane highway. Other cars were in view, but it was a full twenty minutes and I was in a truck stop surrounded by people before I felt safe.

After I called the police and told them about a possible accident on something called Reed Road outside Charlotta, I sat there drinking coffee for a long time under the fluorescents, looking out at the parking lot as the rain slowly stopped. And then I got moving toward 66.

Here's what would have happened if I had gotten out of my car and gone to check on that bike—and I know I have no way of knowing this, and yet I *do* know. That car up on the hill would have begun to suddenly back up as fast as its old engine would let it, coming down the hill at top speed, jerking crazily left and right, trying to keep on a straight line. And I would've completely frozen. And because it would be so out of control, shuddering and bouncing on the grass, it may have missed me by twenty feet, but it would have then rammed into my car, giving it time to stabilize and try to get me again. But at least in that split second, I would have been able to finally see if there was anyone actually behind the wheel.

There was no hit and run accident that night on Reed Road. I never got an explanation for why the bike was there. And there were no more hit and runs in the tri-county area for more than a year, and even that was some drunk in a van. It's a big county with a lot of roads. Who knows where that car went, and if it ever did get the exact murder it wanted.

cellar

Almost everyone has that person in their old group who drifts away for the wrong reasons. In ours, it was a guy named Chad. Over the years, there were worse and worse decisions, drugs, occasional arrests, habitual lies, and depression. He was known to black out mysteriously but he refused to see any doctors. He drifted away and we almost never saw him anymore; only one or two of us even made an occasional effort. Then one night he called me out of the blue and said he had a problem he thought only I might understand.

I wound up driving out to a Denny's to talk to him. He looked pretty bad, my best friend from 7th and 8th grade. He'd brought along an answering machine, an old thing he'd been using, as he only had a landline. He said he wanted me to listen to two messages he'd gotten recently, both at night when he'd been at the other end of the house he'd inherited from his grandmother. The first message was startling because of the voice, which was weirdly high-pitched but so gravelly it almost sounded fake:

Let me out.

Let me out.

Hey Mister Popcorn...

Down in the cellar.

Time to come out.

Chad's machine didn't record numbers. He said the weird thing was that when he'd checked the message, he happened to have been holding a bag of store-bought popcorn. He'd been a little freaked out and had gone down into the cellar. I'd never seen it, it was apparently the classic big cement room with a washing machine that didn't work. There had been nothing there.

The very next night, the machine beeped again. By the time he'd gotten to it, the message was recorded and the line was dead:

Let me out.

Let me out.

Cellar's colllllld...

Blue sock. White sock.

The longer you wait the taller I get.

Let me out.

Chad had listened to that five times, trying to figure it out. It was only when he went to bed an hour later and was putting on some sweatpants that he realized he had been wearing one blue sock and one white sock all day; it was Sunday and he hadn't gone out anywhere. He hadn't been able to bring himself to go down into the cellar until the next morning. And of course, there was no one there.

Now Chad wanted to stay the night at my place because he was afraid. He didn't know why, but he thought I was the only one who might not laugh at him. I said OK, and he followed me twenty miles to my house, where he slept on the sofa. He hung out at my place the next day while I was at work, and he was still there when I got back, which I wasn't crazy about. He did apologize and asked me for one last favor, which was to go back with him and check his house with him, and then he said he'd be fine. He knew it was insane, but he swore this would be it. I said Yeah, OK, let's go. He took the answering machine back to his house with him.

The place was going to seed under his care. It was dirty, and random junk was everywhere. He'd been trying to resell junk on eBay, stuff he'd gotten at yard sales or through Craigslist curb alerts. He and I walked together through every room. The mess continued in the cellar, which was at the bottom of a freakishly steep and unstable wooden stairwell. To soothe his mind, I even made a show of checking behind the furnace, in a two-foot crawlspace. He said he probably wouldn't ever plug the machine back in and he'd be okay now. Maybe he'd call me when he'd solved the mystery. Just as I was leaving, he got a weird look in his eyes and he said *Hey, tell me it's not you doing this. It's not you, right, I'm stupid to think that?* He immediately said he was sorry, but that he was losing it. I began to wonder just how close he was to his whole life coming apart for good, how much was going on that I didn't want to know about.

Driving back home, a sad thought that had been haunting me for a while crystallized as I played those messages in my mind again and again. I thought that voice sounded way too much like Chad's. I didn't understand the psychology of it then, but I figured he had entered some phase where he was desperate for attention and consolation of some kind, going so far as to do this strange thing. It turned out I hadn't been the first person he'd called about it; he'd asked my friend Steve to come meet him too, but Steve had sidestepped the obligation.

And then when I got home, there was about a hundred dollars missing from a box I'd kept it in for when the mowing service came around. I thought Okay, \$100 is the price for never having to speak to Chad again. Maybe it's time to take that offer.

About 11:30 that night I woke up because my cellphone was ringing. I let it go to voicemail and then checked the message. It was Chad. He was begging me to drive back over to his house. He sounded drunk. He said he had a new message and he didn't know what to do. He'd wait for up for me. I called him back, but he didn't pick up.

I laid awake for another half hour, and then I got out of bed. And I drove up to Crown Corner.

His house was dark, and his front door was unlocked. No one came when I knocked, so I went in. No lights on inside whatsoever.

I went down a short hallway to the only bedroom. The door was open, and the covers of the bed were ruffled, but Chad wasn't in there. I called out to him every thirty seconds or so as I explored.

In the kitchen, the answering machine was back on the counter and plugged in again. I went over to it, and I pressed the new messages button. When the strange voice spoke this time, it was with a stark viciousness that hadn't been there before.

Sleeping there like a stick...

Let me out down here.

Let me out before he comes ... and I'll make you my friend.

Answer me.

Even before the message ended, I heard footsteps. I backed out into the hallway. At the very end of it was the closed door that led to the cellar. The steps I heard were unusually slow and methodical, and they seemed to pause near the top, and I registered the fact that there was no dim glow of fluorescent light seeping under the door. It was totally dark behind it.

That creaky, stained door opened and Chad came through, staring at me blankly, unshaven and looking exhausted or inebriated, wobbly, balancing precariously at the top of the staircase. He was holding something in each hand. He looked at me and he said, *I didn't even mean to buy it ... it was part of a lot at an estate sale.* I asked him what was going on. In response he only looked down at his right hand, which held a metal coffee can. Then back up at me.

And then, as if he were a diver, he threw his weight backwards all at once with as much force as he had left in his body, leaving his feet and plummeting into the dark as I screamed at the top of my lungs.

I heard his body hit the steps just once before he careened clear of them and struck the cement floor even before I managed to pull the chain which turned the lights on.

I think Chad died instantly. His stare seemed to be fixated forever on a set of old golf clubs near his head. Blood had pooled all around it. The coffee can he'd been holding had skittered across the floor and a plastic lid he'd been holding in his left hand was pinned beneath his hip.

When I was certain Chad was dead, I stood and I took a closer look at the walls all around me. The writing had started in one corner near the ceiling and wrapped around every wall, then looped around and around again and again in letters five or six inches high, sentence after sentence likely made by a black marker found later among all the junk down there. More than thirteen hundred words in handwriting that was eerily normal, thirteen hundred words telling the story of Chad's life—not from his birth but beginning seemingly from that very night, projecting a detailed future he didn't have the strength to face. The first words read *You will injure a mother in a car accident on October 9*, and it went on to describe any number of freakishly specific petty crimes and minor disasters the nameless scribe accused Chad, referred to only as *you*, of perpetrating, including dates and locations, and culminating with his suicide, described in the final sentence, which ran behind the water heater in the cellar's east corner. *You will hang yourself at dawn in a campground*, it said. End of story.

There's little other explanation for the writing other than the words were written by Chad himself. No handwriting analysis was ever made, and the rough surface of the cinderblocks which made up the walls may have made it too difficult anyway.

I don't know, though, I don't know. Here's what he was holding when he jumped to his death: an empty, rusty can of Folgers Coffee and a plastic lid that was crisscrossed with very short strips of black electrical tape. The tape had until recently clung fast to the outer rim of the can; you could feel the stickiness there for several inches and see the threads all around where Chad had pried the tape away with what was probably a great deal of effort. On the little bit of untaped space on the lid were letters very different from the ones on the cellar walls. Unmistakeably childlike writing, block capitals that read: CAREFUL DO NOT **EVER** OPEN.

I close this story with something I found not long ago in the *Sixth Dictionary of Occult Manifestation*, first published in 1822. It's the definition of something called a Pyktid. It's a type of poltergeist that tends to concentrate its destructive games on a single attack against its prey, and is also known to cleverly construct lies and false evidence in order to induce paranoia and terror.

moonkeeper

My name is Keith Elam. If you want to talk about the Moonkeeper and the murders he committed in 1997, I can't talk about forensics or motives or evidence; you can go to Wikipedia for that. What I can tell you is what it was like to be closer to the murders than anyone but the killer and his victims, because I lived among them in a way no one else can claim to.

In June of that year I was twenty years old and just barely scraping by in Watford, North Carolina, working a picker machine in an industrial basement for about minimum wage. I'd dropped out of college in a self-righteous fervor; I was trying to live the life of an angry idealistic writer with no success at all. My poverty filled me with a dark selfish satisfaction. I could consider myself a man of the working people, the downtrodden.

But then something happened. My lease for my cruddy little room was set to end on June 30 and I had called to arrange for an even shoddier one in a little house on the edge of town with a move-in day of July 1st. Perfect timing. Having not heard back from my prospective landlord for a while, and needing to sign a lease, I walked to the new house after work two days before that, on June 28. When the guy opened the door, he informed me in kind of a squirrely way that the room wasn't available anymore. He'd just failed a housing inspection the day before and wouldn't be allowed to rent it. He was terse and unapologetic. I didn't doubt that such a crappy house with a visibly damaged roof would have failed an inspection, but I was angry he hadn't called me right away.

I spent the rest of that night on the phone desperately trying to find a place to live in a town where there were maybe three or four roommate listings in the paper each day. I lucked out. I found a room in a group house that would open up July 6. I'd have to empty out my bank account to give them a security deposit. That would leave me with \$130 to my name, and nowhere to live for five days.

I was ashamed to contact my family about this. I had no real friends, no co-workers I knew well at all. I'd just come to this town twelve miles south of the university six months before.

Very quickly the brutal reality of true poverty struck me. After dragging my vital possessions to a storage locker and throwing away the rest, I was down to \$90. But I almost welcomed the challenge, it fed right into my belief that I was strong, I could face any life experience and use it in the writing that I never seemed to actually get around to.

The first night of my homelessness, my best option seemed to be just walking all night, resting where I could on benches here and there. So I started circling Watford, hoping I'd somehow be

able to function at work the next morning. I couldn't financially afford to miss another day there. I would walk for an hour, then sit somewhere and try to read, then get up again and keep going. But you have no idea how long a night really is when you're just trying to kill it on foot. It's boring and tedious and lonely.

Somewhere around 2:30 a.m. I leaned against the side of Grant Street Elementary and closed my eyes, and the next thing I knew the sun had cracked the horizon. I had made it till 6:15. I got up and began to walk the two miles to work, exhausted, feeling filthy.

I didn't realize as I went that just two and a half hours before, at about 3:40, an elderly woman living close to the corner of Walnut and Conyers near the center of town had gotten out of bed to pour some milk for her cat when she noticed a faint yellow glow striking the windowpane in her living room. She looked out to see something that looked like a big long sack of mulch burning in the intersection of those two streets, where she'd lived for more than forty years. She called the police immediately, angry about this vandalism.

When I got to Walnut and Conyers that morning, where Porter's Hardware was, and Jerry's Homestyle Deli where I sometimes got a sandwich in the morning, police tape had been stretched across all four corners, blocking my way. Under the streetlamps, which were still on at dawn, stood two men, both law enforcement. There was a weird-looking machine nearby, on a big rolling cart. I figured out later that it was what had been used to vacuum up the ashes from the spot on the pavement where the Moonkeeper, who hadn't yet been given that name, had dumped his first victim. No one knew about the thirty-eight stab wounds in the victim's chest, back, legs, and arms until the coroner did.

It was the first murder in Watford in four years, and the most gruesome one it had ever known. I wouldn't find out much about it until I got off work and slumped over to the Pasta House on Mercia for the cheapest meal I could buy. My brain and senses were dulled from fatigue when I picked a newspaper off a nearby table and read the front page. The FBI had been contacted already. Which probably meant there was something even more unusual about the crime than the paper could uncover or was willing to print.

But that's something that can be read about in books, or on the internet. Like I said, I can tell you about images and sounds. The way the town felt late at night on my second journey into those dead hours when Watford was asleep but I was not. In my condition there was no way I could stay up past midnight, so the time had come to locate a safe spot where I wouldn't be noticed for hours. After a crude sink bath at the library, I went out. It was 7:30 and the sun was setting.

No book will tell you what it was like to cross the intersection of Walnut and Conyers in the dark and crouch down and see the scarring on the pavement from the heat of the fire, and touch it. Everything around me looked like it always had. Porter's Hardware, which closed at six and had its big shades pulled down. I remember there was always this sticker on the corner of the front window, I'll never forget, it said Lionel Trains Sold Here, but they never were, that faded sticker was a holdover from the 1960s. Across the way, the deli with a new hand-lettered Help Wanted sign because I knew the girl who had started there working the counter that summer had gotten pregnant and just moved away. And row houses on both sides of the street, not very nice ones. Crooked boards on the porches, missing numbers.

I walked toward the east side of town, trying to figure out whether a darkened house meant the owners were really gone and I could sleep in their shed, trying to predict whether a door at the bottom of a stairwell attached to a decrepit office building might or might not open unexpectedly in the middle of the night, discovering my huddled form.

The streets of Watford were crypt-silent by ten o'clock, and that's when I became afraid. Here I was, out in the open, nowhere to go, while a killer may have been somewhere very near. As soon as I went down a poorly lit street the fear came on strong. The victim, age 31, who had disappeared from outside the medical arts building while waiting for a ride, hadn't been just stabbed; the victim had been... displayed. An act of intense rage.

I felt the need to find shelter quickly, but every spot seemed flawed, exposed, or dangerous. I had an idea to walk along the train tracks that bordered the east edge of town; they ran alongside the steep rock edifice of Sugarbend Hill. I seemed to remember ridges and notches in the dark base of the rock where I could probably sit and be mostly unseen, disturbed only when a rare freight train rumbled past toward Clive. I could live with that.

I cut behind the farm supply store on Bocket Road and through fifty feet of woods to pop out onto the unlit tracks. I began to walk down the center of them under an orange half moon, inspecting potential spots as I went. This spot was too uncomfortable, that one would make me sit too upright all night. I checked my watch: 11:15. I was so tired my mind couldn't think very logically. Through the trees on my right, an occasional sprinkle of light hinted at the back of a house, but soon even those stopped and I was essentially cutting through the woods.

I looked up and I saw someone else on the tracks, coming toward me. I got off the tracks and kept going along the side, hugging the strip of scrubland that surrounded the mountain, keeping my head down. But then I heard the stranger's footsteps in the gravel as well.

The person stopped as I approached. The hair on my arms rose; I could feel it. I couldn't see much of the person's face, but it was a young face. Someone my age.

First he said *Hi*. I mumbled a hello in response. *What's the word of the day?* the man asked me. I didn't answer. He said it again: *What's the word of the day?* The question was childlike, his head was slightly tilted. His hair was askew. I said I didn't know. *I'd like to know the word of the day*, he said. I walked very hastily on, praying I wouldn't hear his footsteps following me. Twenty feet, fifty feet, and finally I turned to glance quickly back. He was still standing there, watching me as I moved on.

That night got only worse as I tramped on, so exhausted that I kept stumbling, tripping. I had made up my mind to simply go to Beasley Park beside the duck pond and sleep on a bench, and I was halfway down lonely Commoner Point Road when there came from the darkness a dog's vicious barking. Somewhere way up ahead it was reacting to me from someone's back yard. But then another sound overtook it. It was the shockingly angry, throaty shriek of a cat, and as soon as it started, the barking suddenly stopped. The cat's cry had been not of defense but aggression. Then, silence. And I thought just maybe what I had heard was a mountain lion, not unheard of in that area. I was debating whether or not to keep walking forward when into the round pool of light from a streetlamp fifty yards away a regular cat, head turned toward me, seeing me. It was large and perfectly white, short-haired and wiry. It stopped, attention fixed on me. My pulse settled a bit, but then the white cat crouched low to the pavement and began to scream, there's no other word for it, *scream* at me, like it was trying to tear its own throat out, hateful and crazed with anger. That sound was like a rusty iron hook ripping across sheet metal, like

nothing I'd ever heard. And I'm not ashamed to say I turned and began to move slowly back to where I'd come from. That cat did not cease its lunatic screaming until I was well out of sight.

It was almost two when I finally collapsed in an open field beside Rural Route 7 just outside of town, lying in the tall grass on someone's nameless expanse. And when I woke up a little after five, itching all over, stomach upset, eyes cloudy, throat dry, it was to another headline. While I had slept, a man walking down Coal Chute Road in Paytontown six miles away stopped in his tracks when he looked to his right and saw someone rope-tied to a telephone pole beside a high school athletic field. This man had been headed toward the police station after being robbed of \$10 by two teenagers outside a Seven Eleven, but now he had brushed up against a very different sort of crime. The victim's throat had been cut hours before. The abduction was eventually found to have taken place behind a skatepark.

Things changed so much then. Not only was I scared all the time, but I figured walking the streets of town long after dark had fallen would certainly invite police attention. As a vagrant who had been entirely alone when the murders had been committed, who had no one to say for him, *Oh yes, he was with me*, I didn't want that. There was no bus that I could simply leave town on, and where would I go anyway? The second murder had happened in a different place. I just needed to be inside somewhere, but a plaintive request to my imminent roommates didn't get me a sofa or even a floor to sleep on till my room opened up. And so after again killing time at the library after work, constantly dozing over a copy of the newspaper, I walked at sunset directly toward St. Estaph's Church. That began the long, long night I think of first when I think about the Moonkeeper and the terror he put inside me.

I didn't know how church shelters worked, I just knew I'd seen a sign outside the church at one point saying it could house the homeless. So I just walked in and sat down in a pew for a few minutes. It wasn't too long before someone came in through a side door and nodded at me, walking past. That feeling of opening my mouth and asking that man if he knew of a shelter I could stay at, that was a thing I'll never forget. He was the curate of the church and he said yes, he could help me.

St. Estaph's had set aside one small room at the end of a hallway adjoining the nave for people who needed a place to sleep. Inside it were four cots with linens and pillows. I remember a bowl of fruit and energy bars on a card table, and the curate offering me a microwaveable meal, or a cheese sandwich and potato chips. But I turned those down. I even turned down a shower; I just felt like not accepting anything beyond the minimum. He asked me a little bit about my situation and I was honest. I was the only one there that night. He said I could leave whenever I wanted; the doors would remain unlocked throughout the night.

The next thing I remember is waking up in the dark to the sound of a high-pitched scream. For a second when my eyes flew open I didn't even know where I was, but then the facts of my situation came to me. I looked up at the window above my head. The scream had come from outside and far away. But whether it had been a man, woman, or maybe an animal, I wasn't sure. My transition from sleep to consciousness hadn't been quick enough to process it.

I threw my legs over the cot and stood up and went to the window. Outside and across the street was a small public park, lit indirectly by a few lampposts lining the road. Their glare had the

effect of creating a pool of darkness in the park's center. Nothing moved. The scream didn't come again.

I decided to go out there. I stepped out into the dark main hallway, went down a flight of steps, passed the bathroom and pushed on a side door. It let me out onto the sidewalk facing the park. Even standing that short distance from an open door and safety seemed unsettling to me now, as I thought of a corpse tied to a phone pole, of a burning body left in the street only a mile away from where I now stood. So I retreated to the doorway, and kept an eye on the park from a distance. Soon enough I became convinced no one had called the police. Nothing stirred in those shadows.

Eventually I went back inside, used the bathroom, went back up the stairs, and down the long dark hallway where a wall clock told me it was only 11:45.

When I entered the room where I had been sleeping, something was different. There was a man sleeping on the cot across from mine, an unidentifiable heap, a big canvas bag with the Walmart logo on it and stuffed with objects sitting beside him. He must have just wandered in. And I knew I couldn't stay. If all the cots had been full, that would have been different, or if I was alone, fine, but one man ... I couldn't do it. I very quietly grabbed my backpack and left the church. There was a Denny's only a half mile away. I would get a cup of coffee with the \$39 I had left and I would sit and try to formulate another plan.

I was sitting at the counter for less than ten minutes before a man crossed the restaurant and started talking to me, having recognized me. His name was Ben. He was a big guy, in his late thirties maybe, had a crewcut and a beard. He worked for Dale Plastics too, like I did, but he was in the main plant over in Galahad, sorting and driving its tons of waste material to the city dump. He'd driven a replacement picker machine part over to me a few months before; we'd chatted about football for a minute back then. All he really wanted to talk about now was the murders. He had all these theories about what the killer was thinking and how we was going about outsmarting the police. He wanted to know my thoughts too, all of them. I remember he tended to stretch the facts that were available to fit his theories, and I thought about correcting him a couple of times but never did. When he finally asked me about myself, I told him my story, and he said *Well hell, that's not right!* I was welcome, he said, to crash alone at his house for the night, since he was planning to stay with his girlfriend anyway; she got off work at her restaurant at two. He empathized with me because he had run away from home when he was fourteen and tried to make it out on the streets of San Diego for more than a month. He could drop me off or I could walk myself, either way. I try now to recall my reasoning behind accepting, and all I can think of is that I was more scared of walking on the street alone than I was of riding with a relative stranger.

We drove south through empty streets. Ben got much quieter, like he was out of steam from talking. The radio was turned real low. Ben kept stroking his eyebrow like he had an itch that wouldn't go away.

He lived down a snakelike road in kind of an old working class part of town. Lots of scruffy houses with big gaps between the properties, lots no one wanted to buy and improve. Unkempt lawns, children's toys in the yards. As we got close to the house I was relieved when he told me he always left the place open so I could just hop out and he'd go off to his girlfriend's, he was running late. *Just lock the door behind you as soon as you get in*, he said, *this is the kind of dark that guy must love. You know, the maniac.*

I thanked him, he gave me a weird half-salute, and he drove away quickly in his hurrying, coughing Datsun, leaving me before his beaten one-story house at the end of the road, a dead elm leaning over it precariously. I hoisted my backpack and walked up to the front door.

But the place wasn't open. The knob held fast when I tried to turn it. I swore under my breath. Ben had assured me I could just walk right in. I tried the knob several more times, even threw my weight against the door as if that could possibly help. Finally I gave up, totally aggravated, and went around to the back of the house. He had a bunch of junk leaning against the place back there. An old Vespa that looked beyond repair, a bunch of old rusted iron rods, even a wheelchair.

The back door was locked too. I peered in through the window and noticed it was pretty filthy, and cracked in one corner. Noticing that crack, that little detail, was for some reason what caused my blood to suddenly run a little cold. Why had he told me the place was open and then driven away? How had he gotten that wrong?

The night was so quiet I could hear things I never normally would have, and now what I heard as I started to walk back around the house was a car engine, old and unmaintained. It was a ways down the street but it was coming closer, from the direction we had come, and it was coming closer very slowly, as if it whoever was driving it didn't want to attract attention. Through the trees that dotted the vacant semi-wooded lot next to Ben's house, I should have been able to see the glow of headlights. But I didn't. The car was coming closer, but it had no lights on.

My mind didn't bother sorting through the less frightening possibilities of what might be happening. Those headlights being off as the car came a little closer, a little closer ... I backed up about ten steps and around the corner of the house, so I was totally behind it again. I stood there, one hand clutching the drain pipe, as I heard the car engine suddenly go silent.

I looked behind me, beyond the property. It bordered the woods but there were lights through them, far away. I didn't wait any longer. I hoisted my backpack, put both straps around my shoulders, and started to run.

There was no fixed path through the trees. As I ran I held one arm up in front of me so my face and my eyes wouldn't be torn by stray branches. The woods were blessedly thin. It was only a hundred yards or so before the break came and I was on the edge of a vast expanse I had never seen before.

It was the city dump, a morose stretch of land built where no one wanted to live or go. The lights I had seen were set into three distant tin shacks deserted with the onset of night. Wide muddy tracks snaked around cyclopean mounds of trash. The smell was noxious even from where I was, a quarter mile away.

The dump was fenced off, but not in any serious way. As soon as I fell to the ground on the other side, I felt briefly like I was out of whatever danger I may or may not have imagined. But then I realized that Ben must have known the geography of this place inside and out, and that Chronicle Road encircled the dump.

I began to cross the dump, feeling woozy, light-headed. The bottoms of my tennis shoes became encased in a quarter inch of sticky mud. I didn't know an efficient way out and couldn't navigate effectively in the dark so I just went straight, straight. Sometimes, though, I had to veer around one of those huge mounds which rose up and could blot out the sky with their height. I began to kick away old boxes and cans and bottles and god knows what else as I moved. And

everywhere there was the flapping of the gulls that had settled in my path. Hundreds of them perched on the mounds, eating whatever they could, pushing each other out of the way. I tried to breathe in only when I had to.

I felt my sanity truly begin to trickle away for the first time when I thought I had lost my way, trusting the tracks created by bulldozers too completely. Somehow I lost sight of the lights on the tin shacks and couldn't get them back, so there was darkness in all directions. Then around a bend I stopped because I couldn't believe for a moment what I was seeing. In front of me was something resembling the entrance to a maze. But instead of manicured hedges, the walls of this maze were vending machines. An entire section of the dump had been clogged with innumerable metal and glass hulks of similar size and shape, ranked tightly in giant rows and columns. Bulldozer tracks wended between the rows. I followed them. On my left and right the machines, all broken, partially crushed, rusted, shattered, stood unevenly in the mud, stacked three high. I trudged alone, twisting and turning when I had to through this veterans cemetery of machinery, becoming exhausted with the effort as the diseased mud sucked at my soles. Gulls were perched in long silent lines atop the machines. They seemed to be watching me.

My heart beat furiously when suddenly they all took off at once on some cue I couldn't hear, beating their wings chaotically, swarming, heading in the direction I had come from, hundreds of them. They came so close that I put my head in my arms and ducked. Then they were past me and gone.

When the vending machine graveyard ended there was a pit a hundred yards wide filled with something I couldn't make out in the dark. Furniture, construction debris, maybe crushed cars even. I saw enormous shapes and precarious towers of rubble down there as I walked along the edge, having recovered the light from the shacks in my vision. They were finally close.

There was a chair set out beside the biggest of the shacks, the administration building. I fell into it. I stared out over the weird moonscape of the dump, its craters and mountains, its wandering paths. I sat there for two hours, wide awake, watching the small shapes of gulls make their nocturnal explorations of the dump. That night there was no sleep at all. When I thought I saw a patch of light blue crack the horizon I rose, climbed one more fence, and walked right down the double yellow line of Chronicle Road. No cars came along. Eventually I saw the Sunoco station marking the very edge of the bus route radius. The first A6 of the morning came along shortly. The vagrant had lived through another night. And during it, no one had died by another's hand.

Here's how it all ended. The terror that had descended on Watford and Paytontown had just barely subsided. Leads were being pursued aggressively, though no suspects in the two murders had been singled out publicly. Ben had not reemerged, nor had I gone to the police with any information about him, because really, what did I have? Paranoia?

There's no point in me describing what happened Saturday and Sunday night because the meaningless details, the logistics of my wanderings and my coverings in the empty world of night, would tell you nothing. All that you need to understand is that I was cracking, mentally and physically. Something new had snapped in me when I'd been awoken from a thin sleep inside a cement niche on the top level of a county parking garage by a drunk frat guy leaning

into my face and screaming *Ha!* at the top of his lungs. To be funny, you see. And I screamed and began to cry as he stomped off, pleased with himself, never suspecting how deeply he had injured me, God rot his soul. I looked terrible, I was plagued by stomach cramps and scratchy breathing from some kind of sinus or lung infection. People on the street had begun to avert their eyes. All I tried to think about was the coming of my paycheck and freedom from this awful existence, yearning for just one night in a seedy motel before collecting myself and moving into the group house, becoming myself once again.

At 11 p.m. on July 4, Independence Day, I was standing near the Safeway on Webster, about to cross the street, when the man who had denied me a room because of some story about a house inspection pulled up at a red light right in front of me. I could see him in the driver's seat of his pickup truck, staring blankly through the windshield. In that moment my hatred of him was crimson and pure. As I watched, the light went green and without signaling he moved into the far right lane and took the exit ramp to Route 8 north, headed toward Loon Lake.

I wanted to hurt him somehow. Without thought for my safety, I began to walk in a very particular direction. Toward his house, where I'd been twice before, once to see the room I'd never get, then once to be turned away from it. Just about eight blocks away. My dark fantasy, of course, was to find his front door unlocked. I wanted to go in, use his shower, take his food, do something. It made no rational sense; maybe he really couldn't legally rent me the room, maybe he'd just been caught in a bad way. And I knew I didn't have anything like that in me. But still I went.

I made no attempt to hide myself as I crossed the ugly lawn, went up onto the long creaky porch, and pulled on the door, which, of course, was locked tight. *What have I become*, I remember thinking right then. And with perfect timing, I felt raindrops on my shoulders, my face. I could make out dark clouds overhead.

The rain came very quickly, catching me out. I looked to my left and right, where the neighboring houses, no great prizes themselves, held no indication of anyone being awake and watchful. I got down off the porch and did what I still think was the most logical thing in the moment. I got under it. Even though it was utterly black under there, it was roomy, and dry, and no one could see me. I scrunched in just a few feet, out of sight, and I was able to lean back against the cement foundation with a full inch of headroom above me. The rain thrummed on the wood above my head and began to puddle just five feet to my right, but I was safe from it, just for the moment. The dirt beneath me was smooth. *Just till it stops raining*, I thought. I felt a grim kind of victory somehow, knowing that at least my would-be landlord—Derek, his name had been—couldn't keep me completely away from his shelter.

The rain sounded soothing, comforting. Fatigue swallowed me whole, finally catching up with me in a gentle assault, and I think I was probably awake for maybe three minutes under that porch before blacking out in a way I hadn't for years.

I dreamed. I was inside the house. Derek was leading me up to my room. He was breathing heavily because it was an effort for him to climb so many stairs. He was apologizing for the misunderstanding. *Here you are, it's all yours*, he was saying, sweeping one arm across my tiny bedroom on the top floor. I said, *Why is there a hammer on my bed? What's that doing there?* And he said, *Well, I thought you might like to play a little game. Kind of a ... secret game.*

When I woke up under the porch, the rain had stopped. It was dawn. I'd slept the whole night through, and now lay on my side with my face pressed against the cold dirt. I was still dry somehow, as if God himself had decided to watch over me.

I was just trying to lift myself off my numb left side when I heard the front door of the house open above my head. Boots clomped across the painted wood. I saw them through the steps, descending them, all six of them, and reach the lawn. And then they stopped and turned 180 degrees in my direction.

I saw the legs begin to crouch. But no face appeared. Only an arm did. Its owner had crouched just to feel around underneath the front of the porch. He was holding something in his right hand and that hand explored for a moment. There was a natural wooden ledge running the length of the porch, and as I watched from eight feet away, the hand clumsily placed an object on the ledge ... and then the hand retracted.

The man stood fully up again. Turned. Began to walk away. I heard a car door open. The engine started. The man drove off.

I scrunched closer to that ledge. With just the very tips of my fingers, because I wanted to be safe, I picked the Bowie knife off it and stared at it in the semi-darkness.

I made sure to put the knife back exactly as I had found it before I crawled out into the growing daylight, turned east, and went to the police. I even made sure not to wipe the dried blood that was on the knife off on my shirt. I figured they would need every molecule of it.

The questioning lasted all day, and I began to think they might never believe me. But in the end, they did. They brought me hot dogs and let me sleep in an empty cell, undisturbed. At five o'clock they told me they'd like to speak to me again. They had procured a confession.

Derek Christian McDowell had killed a balloon folding artist named Jamie H. Vilander on the morning of June 28, probably no more than six hours before I knocked on the door to inquire about the delay receiving my lease. McDowell's response had been a lie designed to keep me out of the house. Later that night he'd put Vilander's body into a meat freezer. Sometime later, while I slept under his porch, McDowell had finally gotten around to the business of cutting up the corpse for fear the power company would soon cut off his electricity, and thus his storage plan, because of an unpaid bill. First he'd driven out to Loon Lake to retrieve a hacksaw and a Bowie knife from his grandfather's farm.

The police were all kind, every single one of them. They offered to put me up in a nice hotel if I didn't feel like moving into my new home right away. I assure you I accepted.

Two nights after that there was a knock at my hotel room door. It was Detective Prince. We talked for a while. My testimony was of course going to be an important part of McDowell's trial next year, he assured me. But I should know that the murder of Jamie H. Vilander seemed to be nothing like what had happened to the victims of July 1st and 2nd. Nothing like them at all. This had been a pathetic jealousy killing, and likely nothing more.

Four days after McDowell confessed to Vilander's murder, a jogger running at sunrise past the home of Gary and Linda Kastenberg, both aged forty-three, saw something very strange in their

front yard. For some reason the couple was lying there as if they'd gone to sleep in the short grass, perhaps so drunk from the party they'd attended the night before that they couldn't even make it to their front door. But they were lying face up, and their hands were covering each other's faces.

After that, on July 12, it was Damien Lemanczyk who was killed.

August 25, Martha Keough.

October 1, Cynthia Mosebar.

October 3, Jason, Ella, Daniel and Hayley Ware.

January 13, Tina Eischeid.

Penelope Laskey. Isaac and Celestine Milliken. Angelica French. And then, in March of 2001, Sandra Stevich. That was the one where a reporter for the Raleigh-Durham *News* saw a crime scene photo he wasn't supposed to, got inspired, and used the name Moonkeeper in print for the first time. That is where the name began. You can look up yourself what it means.

It is November 12, 2017. I am in Watford, North Carolina for the first time in nineteen years, drawn back here by the murders that took place on November 3 and 7 after an eighteen-month lull in the Moonkeeper's activity. Thirty-five bodies since 1997, found in Watford, Paytontown, Vilma, Trent River, and Tallcastle.

Thirty-five. But no more. It's stopping now. I've come back to make sure of it.

Since my first foray into the dead of night as a temporarily homeless twenty-year-old, I have spent more nights on the streets than I could ever count. Life has been hard for me, yeah. I never amounted to anything my parents wouldn't be ashamed of and I don't know anything about love or friendship. But I know more about how to live without a roof over my head than anyone you will ever know. I long ago lost my fear of hostile strangers passing in the dark, vandals, stray dogs, street crazies, drunk drivers, cops, hunger, frostbite, things moving in the shadows. My senses are attuned to the night far more than anyone in the hapless FBI. They obviously can't catch him with their sophisticated equipment and psychology, so I'm just going to start walking, wearing the exact same backpack I had in 1997, patched and re-patched two dozen times.

I have nowhere to be. I'll walk until our paths cross. Easy prey, that's what I'll look like. He'll come. I'll trap him. And then you'll all thank me.

Moonkeeper, come out. I'm headed down Conyers Avenue all the way to Tinker's Mill. Then maybe I'll stroll down desolate Chronicle Road, past the part of town where my old friend Ben lived, Ben who may or may not have been questioned by police sometime in the last two decades, if he's still alive.

But I don't think he's you. Let's talk, you and I, in a red-lit stairwell, under a silent park pavilion, in a vending machine graveyard, about night and its loneliness and its terrified faces.

hiker

A couple of years ago I took some time off to hike a five hundred-mile section of the Appalachian Trail starting in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. As you walk along day after day, there's a grapevine that forms among all the other hikers, and just three days into my trip, word came down the line that some hiker up near Waynesboro had been attacked by a black bear on the trail, which is an extremely rare occurrence. The details were sketchy, but word was that the guy was back on the A.T. already after getting treated for his injuries.

I became a little obsessed with this as I started out the next morning. I was doing fifteen or sixteen miles a day all alone. Sometimes you could go all day without seeing any other humans. And if you start to get paranoid like that, every twig snapping and leaf shifting in the underbrush sounds like something threatening and can drive you crazy.

Just four days later I arrived at a shelter somewhere near Shippensburg, and there was kind of a buzz among the southbound hikers who were stopping for the night. A guy started to tell me the story of a northbound hiker who had been attacked by a black bear, but the details were all wrong, and I realized he was talking about a separate incident. We went back and forth until it became obvious he was insisting the same hiker was involved.

We got together with some other people at the shelter and went over the sketchy facts some people knew. It seemed to be true, but impossible, the *same* hiker, attacked twice within a week, and injured both times.

Most people adopt an informal trail name out there when they're going all the way to the end, and this guy referred to himself, apparently, as Claudius. The consensus among us was he must have been doing something wrong, maybe even hunting, for this to happen; it just could not be. No one knew what happened to him after he walked out of the woods to the hospital in Boiling Springs. The area was filled with bears, but they were generally docile, afraid of humans, so what was the story?

When Sunday came around, I was up around that area. I made the mistake of pushing past one shelter to try to make it to one further along, and when dusk fell I was still on the trail, which was an unsettling feeling. I had a headlamp but I didn't want to be out there so late. By the time I finally got to the next shelter, I was on my last legs and it was almost full dark. I came around the front of it—these things are just three walls and a roof—and a man was sitting with his legs over the edge of the sleeping platform, drinking water slowly from a jug. He had a shaved head, was kind of muscular, looked maybe fifty. I sat down on the other side of the platform and we said hello, and I started in with the usual polite queries: *Are you going all the way through, what's your hike been like.* He'd gotten a late start in the season so he was headed to Maine from the Shenandoahs.

He said his name was Claudius. Of course it was, because on the left side of his face were a dozen big ugly stitches going all the way down his cheek under his jaw, and his right elbow was wrapped in several layers of gauze as if protecting an injury.

I had to inquire about the obvious. He seemed to expect it. He spoke very softly and almost serenely. He confirmed that yes, less than two weeks into his hike, he had been attacked not

once but twice. The first time, he had accidentally surprised a bear behind a rock, a fluke thing, and it had reacted badly and so had he. It had stepped on his arm and clawed his foot before he made enough noise to scare it enough for a retreat. And then, a few days ago, came the inexplicable nighttime attack. There had been a bear crouching near a spring just past dusk, and Claudius had gone into a kind of shock, forgot to make noise, forgot to *not* make eye contact. And it had charged. Again, deeply strange behavior. That time nothing seemed to scare the bear, and he believed he had been very close to being fatally mauled until he'd lashed out just so with one of his hiking poles and gotten the bear in the eye. He said you could probably still see the blood if you went that way. He said it with no drama, no special emphasis, just looking out into the dark woods as if expecting to see something there.

I tried to lighten the mood by asking him what he did for a living, and he smiled a strange smile and said he'd been piecing an existence together for a few years, but then nothing seemed to work, and he figured the trail was a place he could go where his string of bad luck couldn't find him. Now he was thinking that it was out of control, that he was caught in a whirlpool of it—that was how he phrased it, *No way out of the whirlpool*. He'd been up for forty-four years, he said, but for the last three, it had been down, down, down. He just sort of trailed off, smiling. He said, *It's really kind of funny*.

I wasn't laughing. Jesus. He said *Look at this*, and he unzipped his pack and he brought out an undersized playing card and he showed it to me. He said *You know the Tarot?* I did, actually, a little bit. He was showing me the Tower, which in itself doesn't necessarily mean anything bad. But he said it had come up for him in a certain spot three times in a row just before he'd started his hike. I said, *How about trying it again?* and he said, *Didn't want to bring the cards, it adds weight*. But he'd kept the Tower, like an omen. He said he liked to laugh out loud a lot as he walked along, that there was a lot of humor in his situation that took some time to appreciate.

I wished other hikers would come along to the shelter; I wasn't crazy about being alone with him. But he stood up and said he was going to walk through the night again, to make up some miles. Yet he didn't put on a headlamp. We shook hands and off he went. A half hour later another hiker showed up at the shelter, and then two more.

The next day was drizzly and a little misty. I was going to push myself to try to make it to the next town and take a zero day there. Even a little rain and the sounds deep in the forest become mysterious; incredibly peaceful on the one hand, but on that day, not so much. I kept my head down and walked and walked.

At one point I smelled something very sharp and I froze, trying to listen hard. I looked back at the way I'd come, having a sense something was there. I waited ... it must have been five minutes, getting more and more tense. The whole day was like that. I felt unwelcome out there, which is something I'd never felt before, and I was ashamed at letting my imagination run away like that.

I began to obsessively check my map around six because it seemed like I should be farther along than I was. It seemed like I was already starting to lose the light because of all the cloud cover. By 7:15 it felt like full dusk had already set in and I still had a mile and a half to go.

I had expected a couple of rock scrambles here and there, and here came one, just when I felt at my most exhausted. I packed away my hiking poles and balanced myself carefully on the slick rocks, crouching low as I maneuvered. I came up to a natural cairn taller than I was. I took my backpack off and I tossed it up and over the blind spot and got to work climbing up.

When I pushed my head over, a jolt of shock went through me as I realized I had thrown my backpack onto someone who was lying on the top of the rock, face up in the light rain. At first I thought they must be sleeping, but they hadn't awoken when my pack hit their legs. And I immediately knew Claudius was dead.

Even before I saw his face I saw his right leg. Below his knee for twelve inches the skin was puffy, red and black and gray, mottled and dead, and a pair of puncture marks stood out. Rattlesnake bite. It usually took hours to die, but maybe it had loaded him with all the venom it had. But his face was the thing that ended my hike that very day.

When I got to town to report what I'd found, that was it, I never went back to the woods. Claudius' eyes had been wide open and it looked like he'd died not just grinning but almost laughing, his mouth locked that way, as if the end of his disastrous, one-of-a-trillion run of bad luck had amused him to no end, in the darkest way imaginable. And if you look at the statistics, at how unlikely his fate truly was, maybe he was right to die laughing. The whirlpool, as he'd called it, which we all later learned had claimed his job, most of his hearing, and the lives of his brother and mother, all since the previous May, had pulled him all the way down. The Tower had won.

circles

My name is Stuart Rafael. On the night of August 10, 1979, a man living in Bonaparte, Florida was awakened in the middle of the night by the piercing screams of a child coming from outside his house on a quiet road. He bolted out of bed and ran instinctively to his front door and out into his yard, mortified and ready to help. The moment he got to the edge of his lawn, though, the screaming, which he would identify at that of a boy, stopped. He looked up and down the road. It was only a little past twelve but no neighbors seemed to be awake in his upper middle class neighborhood. The houses on his side of the road faced a very small, nondescript public park which bordered a quiet lake on its other side. Monkey bars, a sliding board, a few benches looking out over the water.

He crossed the road, believing someone in Starling Park had been the source of that terrible sound. He saw that the park's most popular feature, a modest foot-propelled carousel consisting of four tiny horses on a creaky metal platform, was slowly spinning, though no child was in sight. As he approached, the carousel slowed and slowed, then finally stopped. The horses stared blankly into the dark, their paint faded and chipped, one of them a little wobbly, an amusement to be replaced sometime with something more modern. The man who heard the screams returned to his house and called the police, though nothing out of the ordinary was discovered that night.

Just eight hours later, a woman with the interesting name of Wanda Windows was sitting on one of Starling Park's two benches under a cloudy sky, reading a novel before reporting to her shift at a Ponderosa Steakhouse. She glanced up to see a small boy of perhaps eight approaching the park from down the road. As he got closer she noticed he was dressed in a suit, as if he were

off to attend a formal gathering. But the suit was very rumpled, and terribly dirt-stained. His blonde hair was askew. He entered the park and approached Wanda. She offered him a concerned smile and was about to ask him if he was all right when she suddenly felt cold all over. The boy said to her, *Why didn't you help me off the merry go round last night?* Before she could even offer a confused reply, he added this: *Why didn't you come to my funeral this morning?*

The last thing Wanda Windows remembered was the image of a large red and black burn on the boy's left cheek, and then ... she simply lost consciousness for several minutes. Later she would tell people she woke on her back in the grass nearby, looking up at the ominous clouds above, and she began to shake all over, and couldn't stop until she got back to her house to call out sick to work.

What I've just described is, as far as I or anyone can tell, the most likely origin of the local Bonaparte legend referred to as The Spinning Boy. From these alleged facts, none of which can to this day be completely proven, emerged a long line of embellishments and modifications to the tale which have stretched to the present day. The Spinning Boy has lived in the consciousness of two generations, persistent in the town's oral history as well as becoming a go-to motif for Halloween haunted houses and hastily published collections of urban legends. On June 21st of this year I drove to Bonaparte to spend one day researching what I had not been able to find out otherwise.

The town has one respectable bed and breakfast, called Ivy Lock, and that's where I arrived on a deathly hot night of thunderstorms and loud crashes of lightning. I splashed through growing puddles to the covered front porch, and as I waited for someone to answer the bell, I was served with the first frightening moment of my journey. Looking up at a high window, I saw the contours of a face looking out from a room lit only by a pale orange glow. That face, motionless and strangely blank, seemed to have no eyes, no eyes at all.

The door opened, startling me. David, the co-owner of the B&B, greeted me cheerfully. He was a retired engineer who had bought the place with his wife Debra, a chef, eighteen years before. I said nothing about the face in the window as he gave me the lay of the land and led me upstairs to my small room. I asked him if he and his wife lived here alone. He said yes, they did. Any other guests here tonight? No.

Oh, he added, except for the girls, let me introduce you. We went down the hall and he opened the door to a large bedroom that had been converted into a sitting parlor.

Beside the window sat a mannequin positioned at an antique spinning wheel. The mannequin was dressed in colonial clothing, hands positioned at the wheel in mid-creation, though that thing likely hadn't rotated in more than a hundred years. The mannequin's face was virtually featureless, of truly vintage design, gray and pale. This was Miriam, I was told, bought from an antique dealer in 1941 by owners of the house now long-dead. Once, long ago, metal rods, if activated, would make the wheel turn and make Miriam's hands move on it in a primitive way. Her head, draped in bobbed black hair, was craned to gaze out the upper window as she worked. Across the room, in front of a fireplace, stood Judy, manufactured in the late 1890s, five feet tall, wearing a very large hoop skirt. Her own face was completely smooth; a dark brown wig was the only indication of her humanity. She leaned forward slightly at the waist and her own set of supporting and cleverly hidden metal rods would, if she were operational,

cause her to push an iron poker into the fireplace to occasionally stir whatever ashes lay within. The fireplace itself hadn't been used for twenty years. The girls added a bit of rustic charm to the place, David told me.

You've probably never heard of the legend of the Spinning Boy, he said, taking me completely off-guard. I told him I had, several times. He smiled humbly and confessed that on the website advertising the B&B, he and his wife had once guiltily fabricated some story about how the ghost snuck into the house each August 10th and caused the spinning wheel to suddenly rotate, in the middle of the night, because that was during the period when the tiny carousel where he'd allegedly died or disappeared had been removed from Starling Park, and the antique in this very room was the thing then that moved in circles and fascinated him. All nonsense, David admitted, but they'd been convinced by a friend that a ghost story would bring in a little more business. I smiled and changed the topic.

So many versions of the story had emerged since 1979. Depending on who you talked to in Bonaparte, or which clumsy and tainted oral history you entertained, people would sometimes see the boy walking down Canal Road in a daze and wearing his funeral suit ... or the carousel, before it had been removed for reasons unknown in 1988, would spin by itself on hot nights. The origin of the little boy's burn, the one Wanda Windows had claimed she'd seen on his cheek, was eventually focused on the most obvious possibility. Since the park's construction, there had been a sign posted in it that warned parents and children that the metal and iron of the playground equipment could become extremely hot to the touch. This was true; as a child who had spent four years right here in Bonaparte before moving north with my family, and who had been in the third grade in 1979, I could attest to more than a few painful moments of suddenly touching the wrong rung or monkey bar when the temperature reached one hundred; the chain links on the swings were brutal on the hands. If a little boy had in fact been riding the carousel at night, then of course it was totally unlikely he would have been scorched by either the horses themselves or the little metal rods that protruded from the sides of their heads, but of course, an urban legend doesn't apply logic to itself. And so that boy had screamed and screamed upon somehow getting his face stuck against that hot metal until his cheek had been indelibly branded.

After breakfast at the B&B on Sunday, I drove around the town where I'd lived between the ages of eight and eleven. I hadn't been back since then. My therapist had told me I might not feel any sense of strain or anxiety at first, but that it might grip me a little more with each familiar sight. But I was okay. *This is going to work*, I thought.

A line of aggressive rainstorms had gripped the entire region, and they would not let go. I found that Redbird's, a local breakfast and lunch dive my sister and I used to be taken to as a treat on Sundays, was still going strong, and I took a table in the corner. I was waited on by one of the skinniest teenagers I'd ever seen, a kind of nerdy kid named Mickey who seemed a little scared of the customers, including me. But he warmed up to me the more I talked to him about the town, pretending I was new here. Did he know about The Spinning Boy? I asked. He nodded, tried to sort out in his mind which tale I was talking about. He briefly got it confused with the story of something called Crybaby Bridge out in Pennyfar, but then he was able to explain it to me, stopping himself once in the middle to marvel at how hard the rain was coming down outside. Years ago, he said, some kid had gotten flattened beneath the little carousel in Starling Park. The structure had just fallen on him. They'd taken the carousel away, and sometimes

people saw the child walking down near the historic mill on the edge of town holding his head and moaning, dressed in torn pajamas. *What about his face?* I asked, and Mickey shrugged and said he didn't know much about that. Maybe something about the devil painting a V on his cheek, as a warning? V for vile, they said. Yeah. It wasn't a very scary legend, and he suggested if I was here in October that I go to Cheatham's Haunted Village, an attraction built at the old minimum security prison on Kings Avenue, because that, *that* was scary.

Six blocks over, at Walpole's Rummage, a huge thrift shop that drew people in from all over, I had significantly more trouble finding someone who was willing to discuss the Spinning Boy, because the chatter was all about the tropical storm that was now officially headed our way, with Bonaparte, Pennyfar, and Stockley being its central targets, having veered dramatically off course just in the last twelve hours, headed deeply inland. The town was preparing now for the kind of rain it hadn't seen in ten years. There was both fear and a twisted sort of mirth running through it, the fear and excitement over something big and different coming. But I spotted someone in the used books aisle who seemed promising. An attractive woman of about my age but who was much more fit; she was reading a page in a collection of poetry very intently. Her name was Nadine. Initially I thought I was out of luck since she told me she was from New York and just roaming the area during an off day at a screenwriter's retreat, but she knew about the Spinning Boy from reading small town legends when she had once outlined a horror novel.

She had been under the impression the tale dated back to the 1890s. The young town of Bonaparte had supposedly been delighted to be given the carousel as a gift from a wealthy industrialist. He'd been travelling through and become aghast that the local children, of whom there were only about twelve at the time, had so few places to play. Starling Park itself had been built around the little thing in a burst of inspiration, but on the very first night, a small boy who had been playing there all day snuck out of his house to return to the carousel, unable to resist it. And he had pushed it around and around all by himself, and hopped on at high speed, and slipped and ... gotten his head caught somehow, dragged in an agonizing circle, unable to breathe, until he died. He had been buried underneath the carousel as a tribute. And to this day, he sometimes returned to it, dressed in his burial clothes. His face had been scratched very badly in the accident, especially on his left cheek, with a terrible scar in the shape of a V corrupting his angelic appearance.

Nadine said she was actually planning on swinging by Starling Park on her way out of town to grab a photo of the spot, if the rain ever let up. The carousel had been restored to its original spot in 2004, dug out of storage by some planning committee for reasons as mysterious as why it was removed to begin with. Who knew where it had been. Nadine was very nice, but human contact beyond my own instigation has always typically been too much for me, and I decided not to join her. I would wait to return to the park.

It was two miles to the community of Butterfield, my old neighborhood. My memories were not many, since it had been a fairly brief stay, despite my parents' desire to put down roots. That plan had gotten delayed by just one more year, and those roots were put down in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania instead. Wipers fighting the growing torrent of rain, my Toyota splashed along bumpy White Finch Lane to number 416. I shut off the engine and sat at the curb, waiting to feel something. The owners didn't seem to be home. The house was smaller than I remembered, and the big oak tree in front yard had been cut down, probably because it had always threatened the power lines.

They had to move out of this place because of you, I said to myself coldly, two times. A house I might have dwelt in for my high school years, a house my parents might have grown old in, then given to me or who knows, even my children. But we'd wound up moving north, not a big deal. I just had some problems as a child they hadn't known how to address without some professional help, but eventually, I'd gotten through them, and by the age of fourteen or so that was all just a memory. No one had ever been hurt or traumatized; it was just best that they took me out of school, have me home-schooled for a year before the agonies of young adulthood set in. Plenty of kids like that in the world. It made me sad all the same. It made me feel like I had no real right to be here. Yet at the same time, I had more right than anyone to be here.

I remembered a spot I used to like down the road a bit, so I went there. If you cut through the woods off Hopkins Street you popped out in a place we kids inexplicably called the Pancake. Just a plain field totally enclosed on all sides by more woods, a big round patch where the ground just hadn't accepted the trees, and grass grew unevenly. People would take their dogs there a lot, and we'd used it for kickball. Huddling under my umbrella I headed off into the woods, my shoes getting totally muddy, and the Pancake appeared, still undeveloped, deserted on that day. Standing puddles had formed everywhere, some a dozen feet wide, gentle inviting pools that were slowly but surely merging as the rain continued to fall. The Pancake would be uncrossable in another couple of hours, and as soon as the rain broke mosquitoes would be everywhere.

There was a little boy on the other side of the field, standing at the edge of the woods. Too young to be out here in the rain alone, I thought. He wore a small blue parka, shorts, and tennis shoes. I couldn't see his face very well. I raised a hand, waved hello. He did not wave back. Instead he turned away and began to walk slowly into the trees, and out of sight.

I walked directly forward, crossing the Pancake, my shoes sinking deep into the spongy earth. I tried my best to avoid all the puddles, all the lakes, but in the end, my socks were completely soaked. The ground was so marshy I had to be careful not to slip and fall. I entered the trees on the far side, walked down the skinny path I remembered, but maneuvering along its sides, trying to keep out of the mud.

The woods ended at Bell Street, a very quiet, wooded, unlined road at the end of which lay the rear entrance to Menken's Boatyard. I saw the little boy up ahead, standing in the middle of the road, staring down at the runnels of water and the odd patterns they made on the pavement, grand ever-changing geometric shapes molded by the surface's many idiosyncracies.

In the years when the carousel was absent from Starling Park, the legend of the Spinning Boy had changed somewhat. Because there was nothing for him to go around and around on anymore, the story had him running around in circles in the town's empty fields. I imagined him in the wide grass stretch behind Kanterman Elementary, and the Pancake too, all alone as a blood red sun clung to the early evening horizon behind him, running around and around, arms outstretched, bathed in that sickly red light, running nowhere, never stopping until night came and simply ... took him. When the carousel reappeared, those stories were set aside for the most part. The mental image of the Spinning Boy in that field possessed me totally in that moment on Bell Street, so vivid that for the first time in years, I got lost within myself and for ten or fifteen seconds I was no longer standing on the street watching that child study the rainwater. I was ... gone.

When I snapped back to full consciousness, the little boy was gone too. *It's not inconceivable that such a thing can happen*, my therapist had said. *When you go back, you must think of Bonaparte as a kind of enclosed chamber with its own atmosphere and stimuli your system might not be prepared for.* By the time I got back to my car, I was soaked and exhausted.

From two to two-thirty, I sat warming myself in a chain coffeehouse on Main Street, which had undergone a noticeable decline. Times were a little harder here in Bonaparte than I realized. Just as I was about to leave, Anton approached me.

He was a pot-bellied man in his fifties, balding, British; he looked every bit the part of one of those tired English civil servants from a black and white movie, sitting at home with his biscuits, dressed like a college professor who had run out of money a long time ago. Completely incongruous here in northern Florida. Sufferingly polite. He had overheard me talking to my new friend Nadine back at Walpole's Rummage, and admitted to following me into the café when he'd spotted me again by chance a half hour before. He wondered about my interest in the Spinning Boy. Was it a book I was writing, was it a newspaper article, a film? I was vague, I just said it was none of those things.

He sat down, a little handkerchief protruding from his shirt pocket, and said if my interest was truly genuine, he had something he could show me which would be very educational. Not a story, mind you, but a tangible object related to the legend. He had been waiting to show this thing to someone for a very long time, and it felt like fate or coincidence had led me here. Not that he believed in such things; that was ridiculous. To really *share* something, real *knowledge* ... that would please him. He was just an insurance adjuster, but had always been very driven by knowledge. He liked to read so much. He liked Russian literature, he liked books on early theater. He tried to smile a lot—to reassure me, I suppose, that he wasn't strange. He didn't look very well; rather pale.

In his big comfortable Plymouth, which was at least twenty years old, he drove me over to Alameda, about four miles away. Traffic was sparse; some people were simply leaving town. The main road into the community was so waterlogged that we had to take a slightly different route.

Anton had only lived in Florida for the first sixteen years of his fifty-five, and had then been called overseas to take care of a dying aunt who'd lived in Tottenham, and he'd only returned two years before, to settle his father's meager estate. All the while as he told me about his life, he was intentionally coy about what it was we were going to see. He hoped I didn't mind if he didn't divulge everything. He was afraid I'd be a little disappointed and maybe not want to come. He was grateful for the company, actually. I let him be whatever he felt like. I was patient. He had a lot of trash in the back seat of his car, fast food wrappers, that sort of thing.

The house he lived in now was small, just one of many similar ones on Alva Street. Overgrown yards, chain link fences bent and rusted, few formal divisions between the properties, no community association lording over everyone. Roads where potholes were patched again and again, roads that were going to be decimated by the rain. I turned down the offer of a soda and we went into the backyard, Anton carrying an enormous umbrella that would have sheltered us both.

In the corner of the yard was what looked at first to me like a proper white shed, but I saw that its construction was far sturdier, and I realized it was a crypt. Unmarked, very modest, it could easily have been mistaken for one of those tiny houses rich people built for their kids to play in; it was only when you got close that you saw that some of it was made of honest speckled marble. His father had insisted it be built, Anton told me as we approached it.

My father was a terrible man, you should know, he said. Naturally no one was actually buried here, and they never would be—zoning laws, of course. But the condition of leaving the house to his only son Anton was that some of his father's personal effects, and those of Anton's mother, who'd died when he was only two, be preserved there. Anton produced a silver key from his pocket and opened the wooden door and we stepped inside, dry once again. When he closed the door behind us, there was only room for the two of us, no more.

It was totally dark in there for one second before Anton reached up with pained breath and turned on a battery-powered light set into the ceiling. It threw a grim white glow down upon us. Set into the back wall of the crypt were three squares, each about eighteen inches across, no markings. His father's effects were in the middle drawer, he told me, putting a hand on it, his mother's were in the one to the right. Anton himself had never opened them; the executor had taken care of all this. He apologized for the mystery but confessed it was a bit exciting somehow to bring someone here, to tell the story. His voice echoed in a tinny way inside the crypt.

A terrible man, his father. Harsh. Anton had been secretly glad to go to England and never return, but even there, he said, the man's influence had been powerful. That man, whose name was Timothy, had been woken very late one night at the age of eleven by his own father, Anton's grandfather, who informed little Timothy that he'd just struck and killed a young boy who had suddenly run out in the middle of the road. This was in the year 1940. He needed his son's help tending to the body because in the impact of the crash, he'd mangled his hand. There was no question of going to the police, Anton told me. Neither his father nor his grandfather would *ever* have done that. And so, there was the pressing issue of concealment. Anton gave me a strange smile that he seemed to consciously cut off before it fully developed, and he opened the leftmost drawer on the wall.

Inside it was a wooden box, much longer than it was wide. Leaving it in the drawer, Anton opened the lid and pulled back the edges of a dark green towel. It had been used to wrap the skeleton of a child. The skeleton was no longer intact, and the bones and skull had been rather neatly arranged to conserve space inside the box. The rib cage was in two halves, one placed on top of the other. The skull's mouth was partly open.

It had been hidden in three different places by his father since 1940, Anton told me, not revealing exactly where, and it had ended up here. The child had been struck on Graceville Road, one block away from Starling Park, right on the lake. It was likely but not definite that Anton's grandfather, who committed suicide in 1950, had been drinking. *So perhaps this*, Anton said, *this is how it began, the story you're so interested in.*

I finally looked at him, his eyes seeming ancient and sunken under that sick, faintly buzzing light. I said, *Why do you keep this here?* And he said, *I told you, my father was a very bad person and not to be thwarted or disobeyed in any way.* Anton didn't want to believe he'd be tortured by nightmares and unexplained sicknesses or ill fortune if he were to protest, but we all have our failings and weaknesses and what have you. *No one is entirely rational*, he said. *It's just a matter of the degree of interior chaos you can live with.* He hoped that if I chose to write about this, that I would keep his name out of it, the name of his family. But what wonderful background information, wouldn't I agree? What an amazing historical sequence ending today,

with my visit to the town and the first time he'd dared tell anyone about the drawer. He felt unburdened, finally, after so many years of silence, and was grateful that I'd listened to him, even if these bones perhaps had nothing to do with anything related to the Spinning Boy, which was certainly possible.

Anton invited me in for sangria, which he liked to make sometimes, and to turn on the news to keep an eye on the forecast. But I told him I had to go, I had things to do, so he agreed to drive me back to my car at the shopping center.

And as we drove and he fiddled with the radio, I thought, *How terrible was your father, Anton? Bad enough to distort you, motherless Anton, caregiver to a dying aunt when you were way too young to manage it?* I've read that sometimes people who do an awful thing wait for that supremely satisfying moment when they can reveal it in a sly way but not get caught, tell someone a tall tale and enjoy every second of the ruse.

Anton shook my hand as I got out of the car, said it was awfully nice to meet me, but he did not say if I was ever back in town we should talk further, he did not ask for my address or my phone number or even where I would be in a week, a month, a year. In another circumstance, maybe, I would have mused upon this man for hours. But I had something I needed to do.

I could have driven to Starling Park to end my strange day in Bonaparte, but I chose to go on foot instead, and I carried no protection against the rain. I wanted to feel that rain, I wanted to feel the town around me, as I had felt it as a child, always out in the elements, out in whatever God set upon us. I must have looked deeply strange as I walked along, pathetic even, but I saw few people. To be out driving late that afternoon was a grim business, a chore. Only the main roads were navigable without frustration now.

The surface of the lake beside Starling Park was choppy and gray. A few of the houses well behind me across Neoga Road had their lights on; dusk was settling in, and those who were going to simply wait out the storm had hunkered down, wanting only for their electricity to stay on. I was completely alone.

The bench I'd sat on sometimes after riding my bike all day was still there, dedicated to a townswoman who had passed away a couple of years before my family had taken me to another city to live. The playground was now enclosed by an eight-inch-high wooden border which contained the bark chips that comprised the ground. Some of those chips were actually floating in the standing water.

I stepped forward and wiped the rain from my eyes. The sign that had for decades warned parents and children that the metal surface of the playground equipment could get so very hot was profoundly rusted around the edges but still here—and that was so sad in a way, because the carousel was the only thing you could play on now that was made of metal. The new jungle gym was constructed from stout wood and plastic specially tinted to reject the heat.

But yes, the carousel, which had been returned to its original spot in the year 2004, was exactly, precisely the same. The four white horses with their green, blue, red and yellow hair and trim, one color each, those colors faded and chipped, stared silently. The structure was smaller than I even remembered, coming barely up to my waist. Not much had been done about the rust on the handles, or the unforgiving flat surface where children had laid one knee sometimes as they first pushed themselves around before hopping up on a horse's back. Looking at the carousel I

could not imagine how a child could catch himself in these simple mechanisms, could not imagine the position of a small body as the carousel got up too much speed, becoming suddenly dangerous. How would the burn or scar have happened, I wondered, the burn on one cheek that was in the story sometimes, sometimes not.

I reached out and touched the wet horse with the green trim, which would have been my personal favorite, I think. With my hand on its head, I looked up at the sky, the same sky Wanda Windows had found herself staring at upon waking from her mysterious fugue state long ago. The story had actually outlived her.

I turned back to the warning sign, but it wasn't there anymore. It just wasn't there. Yes, that's because while the carousel had been restored, the sign had never been found. I'd imagined it, every rust mark and flaw on it, every word.

I looked up at the sound of an idling engine. Someone was standing at the driver's side door of a minivan, right about where Wanda Windows had seen the Spinning Boy approaching in his funeral suit. A woman, sensibly holding a red umbrella, was watching me from the curb twenty yards away. She was asking me if I needed a lift, or just to get out of the rain. I splashed out of the playground and left the park.

She was just a helpful neighbor with a sleeping two-year-old in the back seat and a bumper sticker from Glass Manor Presbyterian on Main Street. She had seen me standing there getting drenched and didn't want to see anyone get pneumonia. She was on her way home to her husband and two other kids after her volunteer evening at the local rec center had been cut short by the storm. She began to drive me back to my car at the shopping center.

And after only ten or twelve sentences of small talk she asked me if I knew what had happened at that carousel way back when, about the ghost with the mark of a demon on his cheek, cursed to ride the red horse forever because he lied ... and lied ... and lied to his parents. And here is what I told her:

Yeah, I know about the Spinning Boy. See, when I was eight years old, I sleepwalked a lot, it terrified my parents. And once I made it all the way out to Starling Park. I don't remember much, but I think I got the carousel going pretty fast and I got suspended between sleeping and waking, and I panicked, and I began to scream my head off. It felt like it had me, you know, like I was being dragged around and around. But I made it off, and some nice stranger like you put me into their car and took me home. She was a nurse, I think. And somehow this town needed or craved something of its own to imagine and believe in, because it wasn't even a year after that night that I heard about the legend.

I felt so ashamed, you know, ashamed that people were associating me with something so dark. I never said a word to anyone. My parents could have set it straight, but they didn't. I never understood why, unless ... they realized that a story was always more powerful than the truth. So they just took me away from here. Every year that went by I was the Spinning Boy more and more, no matter how far away I lived.

But now, I told her, after going through all my notes of the past years, and after spending the day here, and listening to the townspeople, I think that maybe I've been wrong for almost four decades. Maybe the legend of the Spinning Boy began sometime after 1979, but the facts which had seeded it were planted somehow before that, and needed a generation, two generations, three, to take hold. Maybe I've been wrong, and he was someone else, and he was real.

The kindly woman who had stopped for me was no longer driving us forward. We were simply idling at a stop sign on Kipling Street. Now the look on her face was one of such horror, I'd never seen the likes of it before.

Don't you know, she said in a tiny voice, what happens if you steal the identity of someone who has departed, especially a child?

No, I said to her. What happens?

Well, she said, the ghost gets angry. That's all I know. It gets angry.

I was drunk when I returned to Ivy Lock Bed and Breakfast at midnight and let myself in the back door. In the hours since sunset, the storm had dissipated almost entirely, but it seemed that the house had lost its power. No lights in any of the windows, so thankfully I was spared the vision of the mannequin known as Miriam gazing out the upstairs sitting room in perfect silhouette. Everything was dark. I maneuvered uneasily down the main hallway and climbed the creaky stairs. Stumbled on two of them.

At the top, I stared down the long corridor toward the sitting room where the ladies lived behind a closed door, and a child was standing there, in the shadows, facing me.

His bare legs were visible in a shaft of moonlight, but his upper body was in darkness. My mouth opened to say something, I didn't feel in control of what, and only one word came out, and that word was: *Please*. So soft and frail that it was certainly never even heard.

The child stepped forward. Little socks snug on dry feet. And it wasn't a boy at all. It was a little girl. She looked at me inquisitively. She said hello.

I was not the only guest at the B&B now. Her name was Irina and her mother and father had come over to stay the night because their basement was flooded. They were here a lot, she told me, they only lived right around the corner. *Late to stay up*, I said, and she told me proudly that it super-ordinary for her, but I shouldn't tell her mom and dad she'd left her room.

And of course I asked her what I should not have, but like I said, I was drunk. *Oh sure*, she said, *I know the Spinning Boy. He lives here.*

I remembered David's cutesy but cynical marketing ploy of the haunted spinning wheel. Without waiting for a response from me, Irina grabbed my right hand and pulled me down the hallway to show me. She opened the door to the sitting room, obviously having visited this place many times.

Inside, I expected her to gesture to Miriam and the wheel, but instead she pointed toward the dormant fireplace, at Judy. She told me that the Spinning Boy lived under Judy's big metal hoop skirt. The one David had pointed out. Judy wore it as best she could, partially bent over, an iron poker in her hand that hadn't moved for decades, resting several inches short of the ashless fireplace. Irina said she saw him under there just tonight, but he'd been very mean to her and she'd run away. *What did he say?* I asked, but according to Irina he never ever said words. He'd never been mean before, but that was okay with her, because she didn't have to stay here if she didn't want to. And with that, she padded back down the corridor and took a left turn into her room across from her parents.

I stayed there, in the sitting room, just a little while longer. I imagined the firelight spreading orange and red over Judy's eyeless face on a freezing winter night which would never truly come. The hoop skirt had no pattern, no true color. It could not shift in a random breeze, could not become wrinkled, and no small child could ever fit under the half-inch gap between its hem and the carpet beneath it. My watch told me it was 12:41 when I left the room.

4:19. I woke up in my bed. I was sweating. I sensed a presence near me, very close. On my right side. Someone standing near the bed. I felt him. *Don't open your eyes*, I told myself, *don't open your eyes. Don't look at him. That would be the end of you.*

I heard a tiny movement, the scraping of one small shoe on the wooden floor. One step closer to the bed. I prepared to arch my back and scream as loud as I could, to see if I could scream so that all of Bonaparte could hear me.

Something stretched outward toward me very fast; I felt the disturbance of the air as it came close, and then, pressure on my right cheek, skin against skin, warm and soft, and before I could jerk away, the fingers there pressed down harder and there was a hot pain so intense that the sound that leapt from my mouth was like a siren, a wailing shriek. I sprung up, blubbing, staggering off the bed as the pain's second wave struck me. I threw back my bedroom door and tore down the hall. Already my tears were falling to the floorboards.

Into the sitting room I ran, where I knew there was a big wall mirror. I fumbled for the wall switch and struck it. The power having been restored, the lights came on.

Weeping, I pulled my right hand away from my cheek to reveal the ugly red and black burn that was growing and darkening even now, while behind me came Irina and Irina's parents and David and his wife Debra, all of whom noticed before I did that the fireplace poker was gone, no longer fixed in Judy's right hand. It was found on the floor back in my bedroom ten minutes later, its end still smoking, though the fireplace was empty and dormant, as it had been for the last twenty years. And under Judy's metal hoop skirt how the Spinning Boy must have grinned and grinned, no longer feeling so angry that everything around him seemed dark and without hope.

school

My name is Cy Wistrom. On December 19, 1977, a mental patient named Timothy Shaugh walked into Seacrist Elementary School in Seacrist, Pennsylvania, and murdered a second-grade teacher with a chopping axe. The Shaugh murder was the last in a string of unexplained incidents that occurred at Seacrist in the fall and winter of 1977, and earned the school the nickname 'Horror High.' Here I will tell you the whole story.

In September of 1971, Joseph Tormey died. Tormey had been the head janitor at Seacrist since 1958, and he died of liver cancer. In early 1977, a younger brother of Tormey's won some money in a state lottery, and it was decided amongst the family that some of the money would go toward the construction of a family crypt in Evansten, ten miles north of Seacrist. Three members of the Tormey family were disinterred during the summer, and Joseph Tormey's body was removed from his grave in Seacrist Hill on September 10, five days after the school year began.

On Wednesday the 14th, a city patrol car driving past Seacrist at a little past midnight reported that a light was on in room 21, which fronted the southeast side of the school and looked out on Hightown Road. The officer in the car called the school principal at his home and asked if any staff might be inside Seacrist. That night there had been a girl scout's meeting from six o'clock to seven thirty in room 25, just two doors down from room 21, but of course that had long since disbanded. The principal agreed to drive three blocks to the school and check on the light, as he had a skeleton key. When he got to room 21, he discovered the body of Joseph Tormey propped up in a chair facing the blackboard.

Tormey's body was entirely rotted, and could only be identified through the fact that it was missing from the county morgue, where it was being stored overnight until it could be placed inside the family crypt the next day. The principal, Ellis Xavier, called the police back, and Tormey's body was removed. There were no signs of a break-in anywhere in the school, and the police didn't find any fingerprints in their casual dusting. But there were signs of foul play inside the county morgue, though. The body had been sealed inside a steel drawer whose lock had been jimmed sometime after the morgue closed at eight o'clock. Tormey had been taken from the morgue and placed inside Seacrist Elementary sometime between nine thirty and midnight. Police thought that vandals may have gotten the body into the school through a second-story window that had been left open to aerate a newly painted room, but it seemed incredibly bizarre that someone would go to such strange lengths to play such a demented joke.

There were no leads; there were no witnesses, nothing to ever suggest why Joseph Tormey's corpse was placed inside Seacrist that night. He had no real enemies in the town, and the staff remembered him as a hard worker who truly loved the children at the school. Room 21 was sealed off for two days, and Mr. Appier, the first-grade teacher who used the room, used another. Word of what happened to Joseph Tormey became immediately distorted among the students of Seacrist, whose age ranged from six to eleven. The school administration decided not to tell them what had happened, and so there was only a vague sense that something terrible had occurred. During morning announcements, Principal Xavier told the children that

an ugly prank had been played the night before, and he went on to deliver a brief lecture on the evils of vandalism.

The students of Seacrist were understandably confused. I remember a girl named Susan, whom I saw crying on the playground during recess on that September 15th. Even though I was an unusually shy child, I went over to her and asked her what was wrong. She said she was sad because she had heard that Mr. Appier had been killed, and that was why his room had been sealed off. No one knows who started this rumor, but by lunchtime for the upper grades it was all over the school. By the end of the day, every teacher had to tell their class that Mr. Appier was fine, that he had just called in sick for the day. Everyone went home still in doubt as to what had really happened. I saw Susan, the girl on the playground, walking home at three o'clock with a group of other children, laughing happily about something. In less than two hours, she had gone from despair to childish joy. Joseph Tormey's corpse was taken back to the morgue, checked for signs of abuse, and then placed inside the family vault three days later.

But by the 18th of September, every child knew what had happened in room 21, and some of Mr. Appier's students were terrified to go back into that room. The local newspaper, the *Tri-County Gazette*, printed the story on page two and made the mistake of publishing an unconfirmed rumor toward the end of it. The reporter said merely that Principal Xavier had erased a chalk-written message from the board of room 21 upon finding Joseph Tormey's body. The message had allegedly been scrawled by the vandals who committed the crime, and Xavier had been reluctant to report just what the message was—only that he had erased it without thinking it might be important to the case. So the children of Seacrist filled in the gaps left by the newspaper and what their parents wouldn't tell them by inventing in their own minds what the vandals' message may have been. It was either a demonic warning or a drawing of the school building with blood dripping from it, depending on what you heard and what time of day you heard it.

Two weeks later, toward the end of September, the *Gazette* did a follow-up story on the Tormey incident. The paper didn't say much beyond that there had been no progress in finding the culprits responsible. But it did confirm that Ellis Xavier had revealed the contents of the message on the blackboard to a police source. It had taken him a couple of weeks to fully remember what it was because the shock of finding the decaying corpse had been so great. The message had read: *To all this darkness*. It had apparently been written in imitation of a child's clumsy scrawl.

I was in the second grade at Seacrist School that year. Tormey happened in the fall, and in the middle of winter came the day of Timothy Shaugh. The events of that time happened with great speed. Seacrist Elementary became a kind of hell on earth so quickly that many psychologists agree it was all never truly grasped by the undeveloped minds of Seacrist's children. Certainly not mine, my doctor used to say. For three years I have told her that I remember little of that time, and certainly nothing of the day that Timothy Shaugh walked with a chopping axe into the small side classroom where Jean Willett was teaching myself and two other students how to tell time as the rest of her students read dutifully in the adjoining room. I have always claimed that those memories are simply gone forever.

Everything today is different. The catatonia that claimed my mind and my body for fourteen days recently had residual side effects that no doctor could ever have hoped for. Though my days at Seacrist were shrouded in a mental fog for many years, the catatonia, whatever caused it, seems to have brought it all back. I remember reading the morning news in the *Gazette* and feeling faint, and then waking from my two-week sleep in the hospital, and with it came everything. I have not told my doctor this, for reasons of my own. I have not told my friends or

the man from a show called *Happenings* who called me again not thirty minutes ago, leaving a message of condolence about an old acquaintance of mine. But now it is time to tell someone. I have all sorts of secrets, and everyone wants to know them. I remember Tormey, Steven Odom, the fire, and most clearly of all, I remember Timothy Shaugh. Of the three students who witnessed his crime, I know that only I have the ability to tell what I saw and what I heard. This is my last testament on the subject.

Seacrist Elementary School was founded in 1957, and was the brainchild of Reverend Hardis Russell, who was the superintendent of schools at that time. It was Russell's idea to move students from a smaller elementary school down the street into a larger building on Hightown Road and to incorporate six grades in the building instead of just three, dividing the upper and lower grades by floors, with one through three on the bottom, four through six on the top. Hardis Russell died in 1960 of a heart attack. During the time I was a student in second grade, Seacrist had about three hundred children and a teaching staff of twenty-seven. From the day it opened until its closing in winter of 1978, Seacrist had the highest absentee rate of any public school in Pennsylvania. It nearly doubled in 1977. Before that, the board of education conducted a study of the absentee rate but couldn't find any explanation for the problem. The school was inspected for health hazards twice in the seventies, but still no one could find a reason why nearly twenty percent of the students were home from school on any given day.

The assistant principal's name was Steven Odom. He disappeared on October 4th. A call was placed to Odom's home on the fifth when he still hadn't called in sick. This was on a Tuesday. His wife, whose name was Ladybird, answered the phone, and when she was told that Steven had not come into work, she immediately called the police. She said that Odom had never come home from a fishing trip to Maryland that weekend. The two men who had been with him on the trip said only that they had dropped him off in front of his house at about dawn Monday morning. The police began to search for Odom right away.

The playground at Seacrist Elementary consists of a large square blacktop bordered on three sides by monkey bars, swing sets, and the like. Just beyond that a large field begins, one that slopes down for about a hundred feet and levels out for a couple of acres. Not many children ever played in the field during recess, even though we were allowed to. It was a fair distance from the school building, and the edge of the field bordered some very deep woods. Three days after Odom was due back at home after his fishing trip, a boy named Carl Trammell and two of his friends were having a game of catch down near those woods. While playing, Carl noticed two sticks rising up out of the ground toward the western end of the field, and he went over to have a look. He was nine years old.

He figured out quite quickly that the sticks had been placed in the ground to mark a grave, although there was no sign that the earth beneath the sticks had been dug in at all. Written in charcoal on the horizontal stick that completed the crucifix shape was the name *Odom*. Carl Trammell ran up the slope toward the playground and told the first teacher he saw about what he had found. That teacher's name slips my mind, but she wisely didn't touch the sticks. Instead she went right to the principal to tell him what had happened. Ellis Xavier called the police a half hour later, after the children were safely inside at lunch. It was the second time he'd had to call the authorities in less than a month.

The sticks were made of thick balsa wood and connected at the intersection of the crucifix with a rubber band. The letters written upon them were four inches high and perfectly clear. There was no doubt what the grave meant. And although the ground beneath obviously had not been tampered with, an area of the field forty feet in diameter and nine feet deep was cut out with a bulldozer starting at four o'clock that same day. It left a deep pit in the field and made it impossible for the children to play down that way for three weeks. Most disturbing of all was the baffling result of the fingerprint testing on the two crossed sticks that marked the apparent gravesite. The only prints found on the sticks, and there were three complete sets in all, were those of Steven Odom himself. He had been fingerprinted the previous summer when applying for a temporary position at Pittsburgh Airport. On the ninth of October, Steven Odom was still missing, and no one had come forward to offer clues as to where he or where his body might be found.

On the tenth, a reporter for the *Tri-County Gazette* broke a strange twist in the story. William James stated in a sidebar story that during the previous year, Ladybird Odom had filed two separate battery charges against her husband, one in February and one in May. Both times the charges had been dropped, but the second time Steven Odom had to spend the night in jail. The board of education claimed ignorance of these charges and said that since they had been dropped anyway, it wasn't their concern. But Ladybird Odom had also been briefly hospitalized twice in 1977 and once in 1976, twice for concussions resulting from falls, and once for a broken index finger that she claimed was due to the slippage of a hammer. The battery charges didn't coincide chronologically with the hospitalizations, but the paper pointed them out anyway, while being very careful to allege nothing against Ladybird Odom. She was apparently hysterical, and had to be kept under sedation from the day the mysterious grave was found.

Then something happened that was very odd indeed. Mrs. Harris, Seacrist's art teacher, arrived at her room on the morning of the twelfth at about seven thirty to prepare for the school day. She didn't notice anything out of the ordinary until she went toward the back of the room to get out a ream of construction paper for her first class. There was an easel propped up there, where it usually was, but now there was a twelve-by-twenty-four-inch white canvas resting on it. Mrs. Harris first found it strange that any canvas should be in the room, since she had none for use anywhere, even in storage. She stood looking at the canvas for a good five minutes before she took it off the easel without thinking of the thing as evidence, and brought it down the hall to someone who might know whom to contact next.

I don't feel I can accurately depict the canvas as I've seen it. The drawing on it was done in charcoal, like the inscription on Steven Odom's headstone. It seemed to have been done rather quickly, more of a thumbnail sketch than a thoroughly imagined rendering. It showed a woman's head and shoulders and nothing else. The detail of the drawing was completely concentrated into the face, while the neck and shoulders were done in three or four quick slashes. The mouth of the woman was shown as a frowning, lipless oval in which there were simply far too many teeth crowded in. This gave the woman an animalistic appearance. The teeth were drawn in a rudimentary series of vertical and horizontal slashes. Above them were a crooked nose and some wavy lines in the cheeks, suggesting a haggard expression and advanced age. Then there were the eyes, which were the most revolting aspect of the canvas. The left pupil was shaped like a diamond and was hollow. The right pupil, though, was round and black like a stone, and was nearly twice as large as the left, seeming to bulge out and stare blankly. The eyebrows were two horizontal claw marks. A profusion of scraggly, seemingly unwashed hair tumbled around the woman's shoulders. This time the only fingerprints on the object were Mrs. Harris's. None else could be found.

At the time the drawing was reported to the authorities, very few of the officers on the Odom case knew exactly what Ladybird Odom looked like. Only two men had actually talked to her face to face. One of those men looked at the drawing long enough to formulate the theory that the face on the canvas was Ladybird's. It was a crude likeness, but it seems that as the days went by, it became more and more a plausible chance. The police called Ladybird Odom's home two days after the discovery of the drawing, but said nothing about what they had found. The drawing itself may never have been enough for the police to begin to suspect this woman in the murder of her husband. It meant nothing in itself, and could have been done by anyone. They were most likely investigating the history of battery in the Odom house very carefully, but this was still not enough evidence to confront Ladybird directly. There was more, though.

If one looked closely enough into the hair of the woman in the sketch, letters of the alphabet could be discerned sloping from a point above the mutated right eye and continuing down toward the right ear. The letters appeared to spell out the words *Newmarket Hill*. It isn't known who on the state police force was the first to notice this, or to actually suggest that the word had some connection to the case. Newmarket is a small town five miles south of Seacrist. Newmarket Hill is a local landmark that has some connection to a northern march during the Civil War. It's a sloping hillside of exposed stone on Route 13, east of the town of McHenry. A monument to the hill's involvement in the war is cut into one of the stones at the base of the hill.

On October 15th, the same day of Seacrist Elementary's autumn play, which involved the lower three grades and was put on for the parents in the afternoon, the state police went to Newmarket Hill to take a look around. They must have been acting on someone's intuition, or maybe on agreement that the events so far in the Odom case were too strange for anything to be discounted. They found something within an hour, under a patch of loose earth toward the top of the hill, away from the stoniest soil. Shallow digging revealed first an arm, then a torso, then the entire body of Steven Odom. He had died of head injuries, more specifically of blows to the left of the scalp and one against the neck. The coroner determined he'd been dead for something like two weeks. The watch that his wife had given to him for his birthday five years before was covered in dirt but still ticking.

Odom's death jolted the children of Seacrist. To the lower grades, the assistant principal was a kind of all-seeing God to fear and respect. The principal himself was seen very little and so was a concept of great horror to everyone under the age of twelve. He was associated in our minds only with punishment. But Odom, the assistant, was always in the hallways, going from room to room sometimes and just sitting in on classes, listening, smiling at the kids, and vanishing again. He was an idol of sorts. Joseph Tormey had never been known at all to any child at Seacrist, but Odom was, and his murder frightened us. For most kids it was probably their first ever lesson of death. The incident was in the newspapers for more than three months. It might have passed quickly into memory, but the body of evidence pointing toward Ladybird Odom just got more and more ominous.

There was no mention of the mysterious drawing in the newspaper. The police inquiries into Ladybird Odom's behavior were reportedly initiated as a result of 'a gathering of unreleased, circumstantial evidence,' according to the *Tri-County Gazette*. An hour after Steven Odom's corpse was discovered, Ladybird was called. There was no answer at her home, and she wasn't there when the police arrived at about four in the afternoon. The front door was unlocked and her car was gone. A note had been left on the kitchen table. Ladybird Odom wrote that she was at the end of her emotional rope and had to leave the area. She would call the police with a forwarding number a day later. That day came and went, and the police began to actively search

for her as they had once searched for her husband. Calls to the hotels in the area revealed that she had stayed the night at a Holiday Inn in Dorsey, fifty miles west of Seacrist, and had checked out early. The authorities coupled this fact with some conflicting statements she had initially given them, and suddenly she was considered a fugitive from justice. Justice never found her.

It's been eighteen years since Steven Odom was murdered, and the police lost all traces of Ladybird Odom after she checked out of the Dorsey Holiday Inn. She'd been a housewife for nine years, but somehow she managed to elude the police like a professional criminal. In the months that followed, other events at Seacrist began to overshadow Steven Odom's murder, but you could always find mention of the case somewhere in the *Gazette* as more and more evidence strengthened the case against his wife. Basic forensic evidence piled up, and neighbors began to claim that Odom had beaten his wife a number of times during their marriage. This made it seem certain that she really had finally killed him upon his return from a fishing trip.

Finally, one neighbor came forward nearly six months later with a claim that Ladybird Odom had borrowed his car just after ten o'clock on the night before Steven was reported missing. Half a year went by before the neighbor discovered a large garden trowel tucked inside his spare tire compartment. Police deduced that this was what had been used to bury Steven Odom. The actual murder weapon was most likely a baseball bat or something similar, but it could not be found. The theory was that Ladybird Odom had borrowed a neighbor's car to transport the body because she didn't know how to drive the standard shift of the truck that belonged to her husband.

I remember very clearly that no memorial service was held at Seacrist. There was no announcement of his death or moment of silence asked for during the morning messages. Such a thing would have been too problematic for our young minds. The facts of the case were learned osmotically through our parents, rumor, and the television. After Seacrist closed for good in January of 1978, the mandatory psychological exit interviews conducted with each and every child produced one interesting reference to the Steven Odom case.

A first-grader named Laurie Burke was asked how much she recalled about what had happened to the assistant principal. Laurie told the psychologist that she hadn't thought about it much since the time Mr. Odom spoke to her in the hallway the day before Christmas vacation began. Of course, Odom had been dead since October and the psychologist pointed this out, but Laurie said no, she remembered coming into school twenty minutes late because she had dropped her gloves in the snow on the way and had to find them. She ran inside the school, terrified that she would be in a lot of trouble, and Odom had been in the empty hallway, putting a hand out to slow her down. Not really having any true conception that Odom had died months before, Laurie claimed to have walked toward her classroom accompanied by him. She said he had been dressed in his usual suit and tie and that Odom had not spoken much beyond telling her that the teacher wouldn't mind if she was late, and that everything was going to be okay as long as she didn't lose her gloves. Then he turned and disappeared down the hallway.

The exit interviews were taped, and Laurie was recorded three different times as saying she was certain it was Mr. Odom who walked her to her class that day. She never saw him again and only became truly aware of the fact of his death when the psychologist told her of it. Her talk with the unknown adult was considered just a mistake in identity and not even a delusion, and she wasn't referred to any other doctor after Seacrist closed, and she was transferred to Guthrie Heights along with most of the other children, including myself. She went on to Chester Junior High School and then to Seacrist High, like me. I didn't know of her claim when I was in second grade and didn't learn about it until long after we had both graduated and moved on. The two

sticks marking our assistant principal's grave and the charcoal sketch of his wife may have been incinerated over a decade ago, but since there is no statute of limitations for murder, they might still be locked away as evidence in the state's case against Ladybird Odom, who is still wanted for that murder, and who I am certain will never be located in this lifetime.

As I write this, there is a bottle of pills in my right breast pocket. The pills are known by the trade name N-zepam. I take two a day. They were prescribed for me by my doctor, who likes me to call her Sam, since I came out of the catatonia four days ago. They're very similar chemically to Valium, and it was explained to me by Sam that it would be a very good idea to take the pills to thwart any sign of a breakdown. So I take them. Sam has been my doctor for a little over three years. Two years into my therapy she came up with the idea that I do my own extensive research into Seacrist Elementary's history. Since then I think she has done little but poison me with platitudes and N-zepam. But I knew right away that looking into Seacrist's past was just what I wanted to do.

I have so many details about the place mainly due to a single book. It's called *The Untold Story of Seacrist School*, and it was written four years ago by a reporter from the *Phoenix Daily Journal* named Rourke Billings. Billings was twenty-nine years old when he wrote this book, three years younger than I am now. I've been to many libraries and made many phone calls, and I can say without much doubt anymore that it's the only full-length account of what occurred at Seacrist in 1977 ever printed. *The Untold Story* was published by a fairly small press and went out of print just a year after it came out. My personal copy is from the local library here in town. It was the only place I could find it within a hundred miles.

I've read it twice and I think it's all there, although from having actually attended Seacrist School, I will also say it's filled with contradictions and inaccuracies. Billings gets many things wrong, but he reveals some things I never knew about. I myself am mentioned twice, very briefly, and both times only in conjunction with the two other witnesses to Timothy Shaugh's attack on room 15, whose names are Louis Laird and Philip Darby. Rourke Billings called me personally about a year before the book was published and asked if I wanted to answer a few questions, and I said no. Apparently all of us declined. We witnesses, at least, are never quoted in *The Untold Story*. It's not a very good book, and to call some of its claims outright lies would not be out of line.

For example, I have to wonder about a passage in a chapter called 'Tending the Shadows,' which claims that on October 21st of 1977, shortly after the discovery of Steven Odom's body in the town of Newmarket, a loose group of about twenty parents gathered together in the home of a woman living a few blocks away from Seacrist Elementary. The woman, Frederica Huntley, was a concerned parent of a Seacrist fifth-grader and had supposedly organized the parents' meeting to try to get together on a plan to shelter the children from the barrage of conflicting stories that were circulating, and which were judged to be potentially damaging to our mental health. She had sent over one hundred invitations to parents in her neighborhood. The outcome of the meeting was an agreement among the parents to tell their children nothing about the occurrences at the school, even if they were asked. The facts in the case of Joseph Tormey would be changed to death by heart attack, and Steven Odom's disappearance would be put down to his being transferred to a school in a different part of the state. The meeting lasted for about two hours with a recommendation to expand the parents' group and maybe include some Seacrist teachers.

No names other than Frederica Huntley's are given in the account of this meeting, which apparently took place two blocks from where I lived. My parents never received any invitation or heard of such a gathering. Frederica Huntley died in 1986, long before the book was published. I never knew any child at Seacrist who had been told that Joseph Tormey had a heart attack or that Odom had been transferred. I don't believe the story of the meeting, but Rourke Billings did get the general mood of the time correctly. I don't remember a single child who had all the facts concerning either case.

There's also a lot left out of *The Untold Story*, and a lot that the author could probably never have known about. For instance, he couldn't have known about my first day at Seacrist, as a first-grader out of Sara Brown Kindergarten a mile to the north. My father walked me to school that day, and I cried when he left me, because I had never been away from home as long as I would be from then on. I entered the front doors alone and more than twenty minutes late because my father had gotten the times wrong on the bulletin that had been sent to our house. We'd visited the school twice, and my assigned teacher was in a room just twenty feet or so inside the front door, and on the left. But that day I was alone and confused by the silence, and I walked up and down the long hallway in front of me three times before I began to panic. I knew the name of my teacher, but I couldn't find the room. Every door was closed, and I could hear no sounds. In desperation I found a door leading to a stairwell and went up one flight in the hope that someone would be upstairs to help me.

I remember that the stairwell hooked around to the left and was cluttered with ladders, sheets, and buckets of paint. There was a small renovation project underway in a section of Seacrist that hadn't been used for ten years or more, and I wasn't supposed to be in that stairwell. I went through a yellow door and found another corridor, this one much shorter than the one on the first floor. It was entirely deserted too. I may have been crying again by then. There were no lights on, and I walked down the corridor mostly in shadow. Sheets were lying all around on the tile floor. I was cut off from the rear part of the hallway by a cordon on which a sign was hung. The sign said *No entry*. I stepped over the cordon anyway because I saw daylight up ahead. It was only a picture window, but it was better than the darkness. Around a corner, the hallway ended in an abrupt niche. Two doors were on either side of the niche. Here, the floor tile had been entirely stripped away, and I could actually see the rotting clay underlayer. The doors were very strange, barely my height and very thin. The knobs looked ancient, and an old-fashioned, keyhole padlock dangled from both. I opened one of the doors.

Inside was a closet of some kind, a closet that no adult, and maybe not even a child, could have stood straight up in. A broken light bulb hung from a string. There was an old clock on the rear wall of the closet. It had been there for so long it had begun to grow a kind of mossy rot inside the glass face. Two tiny chairs were in the closet, facing each other from about a foot away. Dust covered the seats completely. And in one corner was a child's sneaker no bigger than mine, brown and also streaked with rot. I immediately pictured myself inside that closet, facing the wall or some other student who had broken the rules, locked inside, suffocating, listening to the clock tick, maybe in the dark, with the walls closing in as the minutes passed, and I turned and ran. I found my classroom five minutes later, and I never went up those stairs again. Maybe no one ever did until the renovation was completed shortly before Seacrist was closed forever. What that room truly meant, I never knew.

Billings also never gives any mention of Sally Trent, a girl in my class, Mrs. Willett's class, who left Seacrist the year before, in the middle of first grade. Sally's incident took place outside the time frame of the others, so it was maybe not of much interest to Billings, if he ever heard the story at all. There's no reason why he should have. In itself it was only an anecdote hardly worth

noting, except to me, who still remembers her. Sally was a slightly handicapped girl who sat at the front of the class and left early each day. I never knew the details of her problem. She was probably just slow. All I knew was that her head would constantly bob slightly up and down as she sat in class, never stopping, always constant. The teacher almost never spoke to her, so she may have even been mute for all I knew. But Mrs. Willett became more attentive to Sally toward the end of the school year when Sally began to stare blankly into one corner of the room. She would just absolutely rivet her stare on a particular point, which was apparently the American flag or the trash can that sat beside the door. I noticed her because her attention was usually very acute. She focused on Mrs. Willett almost fawningly, from the time she sat down in the morning to the time someone from Onadelpia School came to take her to afternoon classes and therapy some Seacrist children had there.

One morning Mrs. Willett passed out some math exercises for the class to do silently. I was no good at math and had trouble concentrating, and my eyes wandered over to Sally Trent. She was staring into the corner again. Mrs. Willett didn't notice her. Sally's eyes began to widen and shift in small motions, as if she was following the movement of something she was seeing there. Then she rose to her feet, pointed to the corner at nothing, and began to scream. The whole class looked up. Mrs. Willett ran to Sally, asking her what was wrong, but she quickly gave up on that line of reasoning. Sally pointed and screamed uncontrollably, terrified. Mrs. Willett gathered her up in her arms and led her to the door. With every inch that she was guided toward the corner of the room, Sally kicked harder and shrieked louder to be let go, as if she were being forced toward an object, or apparition, that she dreaded more than death itself. But finally Mrs. Willett got her through the door. We in room 17 were left alone for fifteen minutes. There were some giggles and some name-calling and more than a few frightened faces. Mrs. Willett came back and explained that Sally had an attack of some sort and everything was all right. But Sally didn't return to Seacrist, ever. I always thought of her as Sally the screamer until she passed out of my consciousness with the onset of summer vacation.

At 10:45 a.m. on November 14, 1977, a fire alarm sent all three hundred and four students of Seacrist Elementary out onto the playground in what appeared to be a routine drill. But the drill had never been scheduled, and the principal called the maintenance man in from his day off to check on the alarm system. The bell didn't turn itself off after thirty minutes of constant ringing. Instead it repeated its buzzing after a two-minute silence. The maintenance man didn't quite know what was wrong with the alarm, so he decided he had to detach it for the day and inspect it more closely. He thought he'd found the problem by the time the students went home, and everything seemed all right.

At noon on November 15th, during recess for the lower grades, the fire alarm went off again. Half the building emptied out. Grades one through three were already outside. This time the fire alarm wouldn't stop ringing, period. Maintenance detached the system again for closer inspection. The fifteen individual alarm pulls around the school were checked to make sure they weren't faulty. No problem was found. At 1:40 p.m. the same day, the alarm sounded yet again. The principal came over the loudspeaker and told everyone to stay in their seats because it was just a false alarm. And it truly was. Maintenance was puzzled. The fuses of the main alarm station in the boiler room had to be yanked even though they appeared to be working fine. The ringing of the alarm ceased.

The next day the state sent over a safety supervisor to look at the alarm system. The alarms were setting themselves off every twenty or thirty minutes. The safety supervisor decided to unhook the entire system for one day for schematic testing and possible replacement. The pull boxes were disconnected too, just in case. So there were no operational alarms when the students came back to school on Friday morning. Coincidentally, that Friday saw the highest one-day absentee rate in Seacrist's history. Thirty-five percent of the student body stayed home.

At 10:35 a.m. on November 17, a fifth-grade teacher on the second floor in room 51 named Erica Els heard a low rumbling noise and saw a tuft of black smoke drifting by in the hallway. She got up from her desk and opened the door. The rumbling became louder. She moved fifteen feet down the hallway to an unused room, 57, and stepped close to the door. Even from the hallway she could feel the heat being given off, and she realized there was a fire inside that room, a big one. Smoke was filtering through the bottom of the door into the hallway. She turned around and saw a fire alarm right behind her. She pulled it, but there was no sound. It was the first major fire in Seacrist's long history. It was also most likely the first time there was no way of alerting the entire school at once that a disaster was about to happen.

Mrs. Els ran into her classroom and told the students to line up quickly at the door. The children were already panicky. They could hear the rumbling from 57. Two other teachers came out into the hallway, and Mrs. Els alerted them to the presence of the fire. Thirty seconds later, most of the upstairs classrooms had emptied into the hallway and the kids were headed for one of two stairwells leading to the bottom floor. By the time half of the children were down the stairs, the door to room 57 had caught fire and was almost entirely eaten through. Children who saw the flames screamed and started to run. A girl named Amy Chicoba was pushed halfway down the stairs and broke her left hand.

Downstairs, I was in Mrs. Willett's class. There was a social studies lesson going on. The first sound I heard was the clomping of feet as the upper grades flooded down the stairs. Then the door to the classroom opened and Mr. Colbert, fourth grade, rushed in, and ordered us out in a torrent of panicky and almost unintelligible speech. The rumbling from the upstairs fire could now be heard. Three or four children started to scream, and Mrs. Willett cut them off flat. Back upstairs, Mr. Calvin Wells grabbed a fire extinguisher and began to desperately spray the fire, to good effect. His early actions might have saved Seacrist from tens of thousands of dollars in damage.

In the central administrative office, some of the Seacrist staff were still unaware of anything being wrong. This changed when they heard the shouting coming from down the lower grades' main corridor. Children rushed by in bunches. The teachers couldn't corral them. The noise of the fire was huge and echoing, and seemed much more ferocious than the thing really was. I was swept along by my classmates into the hallway, just fifty feet from the nearest exit. But it wasn't that simple. There were shouts, screams, and orders from teachers to shut up and slow down. The exit doors banged open and children spilled out. The stairwells at either end of the hallways released more children into the traffic flow of the lower floor. They ran into each other and tripped over one another in panic. I was suddenly pushed to my right into a bank of lockers. A padlock struck my right cheek. Someone shrieked into my ear. I kept moving blindly. An adult's hand steadied my shoulder, and the hallway became very bright. Then I was out the door and onto the playground. But the stampede continued. The scene was utter chaos. Still no alarm bells rang. A secretary called the fire department from the inner offices in the center of the building. Two minutes later, I could hear sirens.

No one was really sure what had happened in room 21, Mr. Appier's room, where the body of Joseph Tormey had been found two months earlier. For some reason the children there went out the windows. None of them would later say they were encouraged to do this. Maybe the horrifying sounds coming from the hallway made them believe that there was no other way out. They were the slowest to get out of the building even though an exit was closer to them than anyone. Seven of the children sustained nasty cuts from a broken window. One child named Daniel Giraldi lacerated his scalp and came out onto the playground blinded by blood, but otherwise he was all right. The last person out of the building was Mr. Appier, who got out later than even Mr. Wells, who had attacked the fire.

The playground was a grisly scene of weeping, shouting, and hysterics. I was merely stunned, not quite sure what was going on. I collapsed to my knees at one point, intent on sleep. I was told later that I'd sustained a mild concussion. There were about twenty injuries altogether, some of them fairly severe, but no one was permanently hurt. The ambulances arrived quickly, after five fire trucks. The children, teachers, and staff were out on the playground for two hours. The fire was put out within ten minutes. Room 57 was destroyed, but no further damage was done. Parents came to collect the children. The principal was left to explain why no fire alarms were operational. He managed to avoid any serious confrontations or punishments. It was the county that later bore the brunt of the accident.

Two news crews arrived at Seacrist right after the fire trucks came. They were there even before the first of the injured was taken to the hospital. A man from a tiny local newspaper, the *Sun-Courier*, took a couple of photographs that entered the Seacrist legend. Three weeks after the fire, the photographer's assistant claimed that the photos had been damaged in transit between the lab at the newspaper to the copy room in the adjacent building. Because of this mistake, the only photos printed by the *Courier* were of the damaged room and of the playground after the fire. The photographer was devastated. He thought he had gotten two truly shocking photos of Seacrist Elementary. Immediately after he snapped them, he ran into the school behind several firemen in search of two children he believed he had seen being severely burned. But when he got inside, there was no one there and he was ushered out again. He was assured five minutes later that every single one of the children had been accounted for, and no one had suffered any burns.

He walked away very puzzled and very anxious to see what came out of his film, which he then gave to his assistant for developing. Three weeks later, the assistant gave him the three photographs after admitting that he had kept them so that the *Sun-Courier* wouldn't publish them. Three weeks after the fire there was no reason to. There really had been no burn injuries during the fire, and every single one of the children was accounted for out on the playground. The photographer, his assistant, and soon all of Seacrist were utterly perplexed by the photographs. Not even Rourke Billings could acquire the rights to the ones I'm talking about. They were printed a month after the fire in a small, now-defunct magazine called *Inspire*. It was a monthly northeast news and sociology magazine that prided itself on featuring fine news photography from around the east. The caption beneath the photos, each one of the same subject at two-second intervals, explained that it was of a school fire in Pennsylvania, and that the two children in the photos had 'recovered' from their injuries, which were not as horrifying as they seemed. *Inspire* is the only place the photos were ever seen. The photographer, Leslie Mortensen, refused reprint rights to every organization that asked.

The injuries depicted in the photos were indeed truly horrifying. Mortensen shot them looking in through the main lower grades entrance. The door to that entrance had two wire mesh windows that allowed a dim view of the interior hallway. Mortensen took the pictures with a

telephoto lens, then ran across the blacktop and opened the door to find no one inside. Two children can be seen in the photos. Their hands are pressed against the meshed glass as if they were trying to get out but couldn't. The child on the left appears to be about six or seven, maybe eight years of age, the identity impossible to make out. It's even questionable whether it's a boy or a girl. The child's hands are clearly on fire from the wrists up.

Another child, right next to him or her, is obviously taller. The age can't be determined because the child's head is entirely engulfed in flame. Above the shoulders there's only a bulbous mass of fire, and the child's hands rise from the window to beat on it to no avail. Someone with a persistent imagination could argue that you can see the naked contours of the lower skull. It almost seems as if there's no flesh at all there. But this can only be seen dubiously through a magnifying glass. The casual viewer is spared such detail. All that is there is the death of two children. The doors at which they pound for release were never locked, barred, or blocked at any time that day, and yet they can't get out. A day after the photos were published in the magazine—illegally, Leslie Mortensen claimed—everyone in Seacrist went looking for *Inspire*. It wasn't difficult to find. I saw the photos fairly quickly. My parents bought a copy and accidentally left it in the kitchen cupboard when they went out shopping one day. The cause of the fire was never determined.

Beginning when I was thirteen up until I turned twenty, I was addicted to a drug called Onavil, which is essentially Valium at a twenty percent lower barbiturate content. I didn't realize I was addicted, and neither did my parents until around the time my father died, when I was nineteen. But I became very sick after I was taken off the drug because of a minor head injury. I was in the hospital for two months. Apparently, Onavil should never be prescribed to people with a family history of low blood pressure. My mother had lied to my doctors about the family history in order to preserve my well-being. Without the Onavil, I was sometimes a wreck. She only wanted me well. I nearly went into hysteria that first time I was taken off the drug after six years of constant use. But it was nothing like my most recent incident, which put me out for fourteen days.

When my new doctor, Sam, learned about the Onavil addiction, she shook her head, wondered how anyone could do such a thing to me, then immediately put me on N-zepam. I bring up the Onavil because according to the *Physician's Desk Reference*, one of its side effects is occasional hallucinations in five percent of users over an extended period of time, even when they're taken off the drug. My doctor thinks it was the remains of the Onavil in my brain that caused my first and only hallucination, the one I had when I returned to Seacrist Elementary eighteen years after it had closed for good. The return was part of the therapy I mentioned before, which began in December of last year. It began with the hallucination, led to all my research, and ended for good with my fourteen-day coma. I recovered from that four days ago.

My Doctor Sam encouraged me to go back to the school grounds. So one chilly day I drove down Will-O-the-Wisp Road with nothing in my mind whatsoever. I was feeling unusually calm that day, so I had the courage to look to my right off Juniper Avenue at Upham Hill, the mental health clinic from which Timothy Shaugh escaped on the day of the murder that closed Seacrist. I parked my car on the side of the road, looked off through the trees at the building, and decided to walk the route Timothy Shaugh took from Upham Hill to my classroom.

He was twenty-nine on the day of the murder. He'd been committed to Upham after being found at the site of a nasty car accident ten miles north. Shaugh was a drifter and had been hitchhiking at about 1 a.m. when he was given a ride by a man named Richard Joyce, who'd been drinking at a local bar. Ten minutes later the car ran off the road. Tire marks showed that Joyce had been run off it by an oncoming car doing at least ninety. Joyce was hospitalized and released. Shaugh hadn't been wearing a seatbelt, but he was completely unhurt. But he couldn't be coaxed from the car. He'd left a halfway house in Oxford three days before. He'd just gotten up and walked out. Records showed that he'd lived in such places most of his life. His parents were dead. He was schizophrenic, learning disabled, and unable to fend for himself, and he had occasional psychotic episodes. The state put him in Upham Hill.

He was there for six months, all told. His records showed him to be in a stasis. He was unable to learn to read or write, uncommunicative, and rarely violent unless provoked. Once he claimed he heard voices telling him to mow the Upham Hill grounds and eat the grass so that no one could tell he had done it. He was put on and off Thorazine during his stay. On December 19th, he slipped out of the rec room at about 8 a.m. unbeknownst to the nurse on duty. There was no other security he had to get by. The nurse was it. After that, it was only a matter of finding an exit without being spotted by any of the staff. There were no clues as to why Shaugh chose that day to suddenly leave, or why he headed for Seacrist. Until the day he died of cancer three years after the attack, he spoke not one word to anyone about anything. After the murder of Jean Willett, he became totally mute. He didn't even complain of the terrible pains as the cancer dug into his stomach, making him cough up blood.

On the day I went back to Seacrist, I climbed over a short fence and walked up a wooded incline to the east wing of Upham Hill. I stood for a moment at the doorway from which Shaugh had departed. He had walked down the hill, avoiding the fence, and headed east. He found a marshy patch of land that led down into a tiny, muddy ravine, and after that, the road to Seacrist Elementary. The property beside the ravine belonged to a cattle rancher. It was there that Shaugh, walking amongst the cows most likely, found a chopping block, and an axe dug deep into it. Shaugh took the axe and crossed the road, then crossed the playground leading to the lower grades entrance. Nobody saw him even though he was six feet five inches tall, wearing a blue coverall, and carrying a short-handled chopping axe. After the attack, they stripped him down and found nasty bruises on the backs of his legs. Other patients at Upham Hill described Shaugh sometimes sitting on a bench outside and swinging his legs forward and backward idly, the way a bored child might do, letting them fall against the bench. Shaugh would do this for hours and increase the force of the lazy swinging motion, seemingly unconscious of it, until maybe he was doing it hard enough to severely bruise the backs of his legs. He never complained of any pain.

I followed Shaugh's route to Seacrist until I finally stood in front of the main lower grades entrance. I was closer than I had been to the building in eighteen years. On the day I left second grade, none of us knew we would not be returning. It's impossible for me to tell just when my hallucination began, since the seam between the reality of standing there and the sudden images that came over me was so flawless. My doctor might think it was the Onavil come back to haunt me. I myself think it was just Seacrist, standing there just the way I left it. There was some graffiti and a lot of weeds, but not much else to mark the passage of time. When I pulled on the door it opened, having no right to open. The place had been sealed for many years. So that was probably when the hallucination really began.

Suddenly I was inside. It was very cold that day. It wasn't much warmer in the school. Room 15 was just a few steps away. The floor was smooth and clean. That must have been part of the

hallucination, just as the open door must have been. Soft light bathed the hallway from overhead bulbs locked in tiny mesh cages, bulbs that would have been removed or simply broken by 1980 at the latest. But there they were. Locks that had been taken from lockers no more than a week after the school closed for good were hanging from their holes. Impossible. I made nothing of these impossibilities. They were real to me. I couldn't think.

A man came out of the shadows from down the hall, and he walked toward me. He wore blue jeans and a white dress shirt. He took my hand before he spoke, just to shake it and drop it again. He said his name was Todd Sunning. He was the foreman of the project, he said. He said he'd be glad to go over whatever information I needed. He motioned forward for me to lead the way. Many people don't understand how it could be that I went so willingly, why I didn't merely turn and run. I can only say that there is an acceptance that comes with utter ignorance of what is truly real.

So I walked with the foreman. I smelled his aftershave, and I noticed the color of his short hair. I heard his footsteps on the tile. I think about his name sometimes, but I can't imagine where I had ever heard the words before. And then it occurs to me that the man's initials were the same as Timothy Shaugh's. We walked along past all the old schoolrooms. I said nothing. The man talked about wattages and improvements to the system of water pipes that ran below our feet. He talked about rewiring and insulation. None of the exact words have stayed with me. I walked ahead of him, and I didn't turn to look at him unless his voice seemed to be drifting away from me. Finally he stopped talking, and I looked up to see that he had left me. I was upstairs, near room 57.

I could hear the sounds of effort from around the corner, so I followed the sounds. The foreman was in front of one of the empty rooms, on his hands and knees. He was stuffing a towel against the bottom of a door. Water was leaking through it. He looked up and said it wasn't a problem, and that they had foreseen this eventuality. I got down to help him. He had a whole stack of white towels beside him, and the leak was getting worse. The water was bubbling and flowing underneath the door, and I just wanted to help, but he turned on me and ordered me to stand aside. The water behind the door became strong enough to force it open. The foreman shouted and stepped away, and a wave of water burst through into the hallway, knocking the door back. The foreman ran. I lost sight of him because I had turned to run too. But there were no stairs anymore, and I couldn't reach the bottom floor. And then, all at once, I was underwater. The tide rushed up and engulfed my legs, then my chest, then my neck, and then my head. I was looking into complete darkness, and I was swimming, carried away. I tried to tread water, but there was already no surface. Everything went mercifully black as I felt my feet rise off the tile floor, carried upwards by the swelling of the water. My head was cocked to the ceiling.

The next thing I was aware of was walking down Route 7, which is a four-lane stretch of highway running toward Plattsburg and Savage. I was on the shoulder, and consciousness had returned to me all at once. I was already walking. It was like I was in a television program that had been turned on in the middle of a scene. After eight or ten steps I stopped and looked around me. Cars rushed past. I decided to keep walking toward a phone. It took me an hour and a half to find one. And I was soaked from head to toe. My hair was matted down, wet, and my clothes stuck to me. I was soaked because Lake Artemesia was less than a quarter-mile away. I had gone to Seacrist but wound up hallucinating and maybe trying to drown myself. My motives for going to the lake were foreign even to me. Of course there was no actual proof that I was even there, but I smelled of saltwater. When I told Sam of the episode, she took it as a signal to stop my research into Seacrist. She wanted to check me into the hospital. I refused. I was getting healthier and healthier. I knew it.

Seacrist Elementary School was closed on January 24, 1978. That was one day before the children were supposed to return from more than a month of mourning for Jean Willett. The official reason given by the school board was that a much longer time of healing was necessary for the children as well as the parents. And sometimes I'm certain that at least one, maybe more, maybe all of the fourteen school board members came to some silent agreement about what was happening at Seacrist. I imagine a scenario that not even Rourke Billings dared to dream. I imagine a private meeting of people in power in a small room at the board of education where the word 'curse' was spoken freely and without fear of retribution. These were adults and they had moved beyond such beliefs, sure, but there must have been hundreds of conversations after we children were asleep in our beds, talk about the cross buried in the ground to mark Steven Odom's death, or the twisted charcoal drawing, or the photographs. Their feelings were never written down, that's for certain, not even in *The Untold Story of Seacrist School*.

The exit interviews were conducted at City Hospital. Not a single child was excused from the questions of ten psychiatrists brought in from all over the county to form an advisory panel. Their task was to draw up a list of questions to ask us. The point was to determine how badly we had been affected. I and the two other survivors of the Shaugh attack were passed right on to more sophisticated counseling when we were through. That policy was certainly welcomed by my parents, who saw that as winter became spring and spring became summer, I was withdrawing slowly from everyone and everything around me. When I started attending a private school the next September, I lasted about two weeks.

I've seen all the old newspapers, all the old magazines, and found a tape or two of radio programs from that time discussing Seacrist. I've read Rourke Billings's book exhaustively, and talked to everyone I need to talk to. I have even visited Timothy Shaugh's grave. The headstone gives a name and two dates and a passage from the Bible. I was finished with Seacrist, I thought, but no. I realized that I'll never be finished with Seacrist when Don Quested, the host of *Happenings*, called me at home on May 4, three days before I collapsed in the middle of my room and entered an unexplained coma that lasted fourteen days and fourteen nights. The coma was absolutely dreamless. And when I awoke I realized it again. I *am* Seacrist.

This is the last part I can write about. Don Quested identified himself, sounding very cordial, and asked if I had ever watched the program. He explained that *Happenings* was planning a twelve-minute featurette to run on the show in one month. The featurette would be about Seacrist Elementary School. I asked Quested why he was calling me in particular. In the friendliest of tones, he said that one of the producers of *Happenings* had given him my name and told him in passing that I was one of the survivors of Timothy Shaugh's crime eighteen years before. I asked if he had called the others. Quested said no. It was his understanding that the others had been extremely explicit about their desire to have nothing to do with that past, to the point where Louis Laird's family lawyer had been assigned the task of deflecting any occasional requests for interviews or quotes. Quested said he was hoping I might be able to give some insight into what happened, and that of course interviews with actual people gave every story on *Happenings* credibility, proved that it was real, that it really happened that way. And I was a witness. I had actually seen what took place inside room 15.

I told Quested that I had no memories of what happened in that room. They'd been obliterated in the way memories often are for people involved in tragic accidents. The last thing I remember was going into the room to be taught how to read the hands of a clock, and that was it. On the

other side, I remember waking in a hospital room, unscathed. I think I shouldn't have offended his basic journalistic instincts by offering sympathy that they could never find out what happened in room 15. Quested told me that they would indeed find out. He said that if I couldn't help the show, maybe Louis Laird could. They were having trouble locating him, but without my testimony on the show, they didn't have much choice but to bypass his lawyer somehow and submit an aggressive request for his side of the tale.

It was at this point that I openly challenged Don Quested. I warned him that he must never, ever contact Louis Laird about this issue, because he had been so greatly affected by the events at Seacrist and he would be greatly disturbed by the call. He had even gone so far as to have his name legally changed when he was twenty-one. I asked this cockroach if he was aware that there had been twenty suicides since Seacrist closed down, which meant that more than five percent of all those children had put guns in their mouths or swallowed pills or drowned themselves. I was not going to let Quested cause another one. And so I openly threatened him. I told him if he contacted Louis Laird, I would kill him. Quested apologized for touching upon such a sensitive issue, but then claimed it was all out of his hands. I hung up the phone.

That was on a Tuesday. On Friday, Louis tried to hang himself in his parents' living room several hours after speaking to an associate producer from *Happenings*. On Saturday, the day after, I was crossing the room to place the newspaper containing this news in the recycling box, and my legs went out from under me. I collapsed and slipped from unconsciousness into a coma. When I awoke, something was different. I remembered what had happened to me eighteen years before. The timing of the coma was no coincidence, and it wasn't a freak of physiology. They were killing me, but I have survived, and I've made up my mind. If they're going to put it upon me to bury the past, then I have no choice to do it, because this is never going to die, not even with me, not even with Louis and Philip and every last student who ever went to that place.

And if you birds of prey must know it all, if that's what it's going to take to stop the suicides, to stop you picking them off one by one with your questions and your insanity, then so be it. I leave this for anyone so sick and disturbed that they want to hear it, anyone so mesmerized by the unspeakable sideshow aspect of life that they would inflict their will on helpless sheep like Louis Laird. You savages will never see the rope burns around his neck, and you'll never see him in the hospital now, drugged so heavily he can't recognize his own sister, because that's not interesting to you, but if you want murder and gore, here it is.

Are you ready? We were being taught to tell time. A man appeared in the doorway, holding an axe. Our teacher, Mrs. Willett, asked him a question. Timothy Shaugh said something back.

There was laughter, actual laughter, inside the room.

And then, you bastards, you monsters, he tried to kill us all.

bells

My name is Martin Rose. After not having much contact with him for the first twenty years of my life, I got to know my grandfather more and more. He and I had a very late dinner at his little house in the country one night, and afterwards we sat on his back porch as he smoked his pipe, just talking. I happened to ask him if he had any regrets in life, expecting him to talk about never having remarried or never opening his own clinic; he'd been a doctor all his life. Instead he was quiet for a long moment, and then said that to that very day, he held one very shameful secret inside, and he finally felt safe enough to reveal it. He used that word specifically, 'safe.' He said he regretted never telling the police that he was almost certain of the identity of a killer. Needless to say I begged him to tell me the story, and with a lot of hesitation, he did.

It was the year 1951, and my grandfather, whose name is John, was working at a rehabilitation center in Cumberland, Maryland. John woke up in bed one night in January to feel his heart pounding and a bizarre feeling of being very cold inside his skin, not on its surface. Alarmed, he got up and started pacing back and forth across his bedroom, trying to understand this feeling, like a panic attack but with more unusual symptoms. Before it fully subsided, he happened to look out his window at his front yard and the winding road beyond it. There was someone standing out there, at the curb. It was a little before two in the morning, and it had begun to snow very lightly. John put on his robe and his shoes and opened his front door.

The woman out there didn't move. She was holding one arm up at her side in a strange way. John called out, but she didn't answer. As he moved closer to her, he heard a small sound and realized that the woman was wearing little finger bells, and she was clanging them softly as she stood in the snow. She wore tattered shoes and a ragged brown dress. She looked very young, in her twenties, and had a plain face and unstylish hair. John asked if he could help her, but she only looked at him and clanged her little bells. She wasn't shivering at all. She seemed to want to be where she was, but he told her to follow him inside so he could call someone to come get her. She followed willingly enough as she spoke very soft words under her breath, not mumbling but whispering. My grandfather remembered that the bizarre symptoms he'd suffered just minutes earlier had disappeared quickly upon venturing out into the night.

He asked this woman some questions, but she didn't answer any of them, except one. When he asked her if she needed something to eat, she said, 'I swallowed a farmer's eye in Lancaster.' And then she opened her mouth wide as if to show him. Her mouth was empty, and she closed it again and smiled strangely. She clanged her finger bells and followed John to the guest room. His plan, if he couldn't get any information out of her, was to just keep her safe and dry and call a friend at County Hospital to drive over in an ambulance as soon as dawn came; he didn't own a car himself, and he never has since.

She sat on the bed, and she told him that she would try to go to sleep but that sometimes 'they shook her head about.' There came no indication of who 'they' were. John asked her once more if there was someone he could call. To this, she responded that she was not even close to being who he thought she was. She said, 'You make me laugh,' and then she threw her head back and did so, and that laugh was what first made my grandfather scared to be in the house with her. The voice that came out of her throat was first her own, but then suddenly seemed to belong to a small child, and then a different woman entirely. He compared it to an audio montage made

by a sound editor. He stared at her, waiting for her to say something more, but she closed her eyes and lay down on the bed, and sounded her bells again.

He went back upstairs, but he couldn't go to sleep after that. After his odd physical malady and having this stranger on the floor below him, it wasn't going to happen. He sat in a chair and smoked and watched the snow fall outside, wondering what would happen if it accumulated so much that the ambulance couldn't come. Two hours passed and his eyes were getting heavier and heavier when he heard the shaking of those finger bells again, and it didn't sound like they were coming from the guest room. They seemed closer. The sound came just once. John got up and opened his bedroom door very slowly and went out into the hall. He thought the sound had come from as close as the bottom of the staircase. But the woman wasn't there. He stood in that same spot for a full half hour, waiting. But for all he knew, the stranger was asleep again.

He went down the stairs as soon as the sky began to lighten. He called the hospital from the kitchen, and the ambulance was promised in about twenty minutes. It would have been ten, but the snow was really falling now. The wind was picking up. John waited on the back porch, closing the door behind him, not wanting to even check on the woman. When the ambulance arrived, proceeding very carefully up the drive, John went out and told the driver, a man named Patrick Eddleston, that no gurney was needed; the woman could walk under her own power, and she just needed an evaluation. The two men went into the house, and John knocked on the guest room door. When there was no answer, he opened it. The woman was gone. They both checked the whole house, though there was nowhere for her to have gone. Eddleston trotted back to the ambulance to call back in. John went through the kitchen and stepped out onto the back lawn, which was under four inches of snow now. He immediately saw footprints leading across the yard toward the woods. He began to follow them, moving as fast as he could, though the wind and the snow in his face and the slippery footing made it difficult. Once or twice as he went he had to stop just to lower his head and peer closer at the ground, because the darkness wasn't retreating very quickly.

He spotted the stranger a few hundred yards into the woods, near the bank of a small stream. As soon as John saw her, moving away from him, he shouted, and she stopped and turned. She waited for him to approach. She smiled and took a step towards him. John remembered that the wind had blown her hair into her mouth and it had caught there, so it appeared almost as if she were eating it. He had to lean in to hear what she said to him, which was just a single sentence. 'I'll make you remember me and all that I can do,' she said, and she suddenly raised her left arm and swung it toward him in a swooping arc.

He felt her hand connect with his right cheek hard, and then, unfathomably, he swore as an old man that he had felt her fingers puncture his cheek entirely, tearing right through the flesh, and he could feel her fingertips touch his teeth and those cold little bells digging against his face and the open wound. For one second of mortal shock and panic, he stood there as she laughed and pushed her fingers deeper through his cheek, seeming to feel for his tongue. He flinched back instinctively, and her hand withdrew, and he felt his cheek become whole again in an instant. There was no blood, no nothing; it had never really happened. The woman turned and began to run through the snow, and this time John did not follow her. He sank to his knees in a panic, feeling his face. There was nothing wrong with it. The woman disappeared into the mist, and a minute later Eddleston was behind him, helping him to his feet.

It took an hour or so for my grandfather to tell me that part of the story, sitting there on his back porch. He filled his pipe again and sighed heavily. He had never told this to anyone, not even Eddleston on that morning that it all happened. He wondered if he should stop. I didn't pressure him, and he eventually went on. There was a real search for the woman, but it couldn't

amount to much, as sixteen inches of snow eventually fell that day and the area was stifled. She had vanished. That began the time when my grandfather would see her in his dreams. These were the worst nightmares he'd ever had, but eventually they did begin to fade.

One morning almost a year after his encounter with the woman, he woke up inexplicably cold and almost went into a state of panic before he realized he was cold not as some sort of premonition that she had returned, but because he'd left a window open. He couldn't forget that feeling of having been freezing inside his skin, as if his organs had suddenly been coated in ice. More than once, his dreams took the form of reliving his first hour with the woman, from the moment he'd seen her standing on the border between the road and his drive. But in the dream, when she said she'd eaten the eye of a farmer in Lancaster and opened her mouth to show him, he woke up stifling a scream, because now it was obvious that she truly had.

There were other, waking moments when my grandfather was haunted. Once he was on a train to Manhattan to visit his brother, and the train had to stop in New Jersey with an engine problem a little after dark. It was sitting on the tracks in the middle of Levittown, and he looked out the window and he saw a woman sitting on a bench under a streetlight more than a hundred yards away. He couldn't make out her face, but for some reason, he was immediately convinced that it was her. She never moved until the train pulled away again ten minutes later. He couldn't say what it was that made him think it was her. He just felt it with every fiber of his being. Shortly after that trip he fell into a depression that had lasted almost three years, and whose cause he could never quite pinpoint.

In 1958, seven years after the night of that snowstorm in Cumberland, John was contacted by the Ohio State Police about a murder case that was being investigated in Youngstown. By that time he was considered an expert in abnormal psychology and was occasionally called upon to testify in court as such. Now a detective who knew of his work wanted to send him a stack of paperwork that represented evidence collected so far in the killing of Father Onur Korvut, a 40-year-old Catholic priest. Half the evidence consisted of photographs of the crime scene. Because the material was too sensitive to send through the mail, the detective asked if he could drive out and meet John at a hotel near the western Maryland border, where John was at a convention of clinicians. He agreed, and over coffee the detective, Terrence Brunner, gave him the materials and told him more about the case.

Back at his hotel room in the small hours of the night, my grandfather first read Father Korvut's diary, which hadn't been kept regularly but twice mentioned his attempts to help a homeless woman who had recently appeared in Youngstown. She was mute, he believed, and traumatized, but docile and apparently harmless. For some reason, the priest never referred to her by name, only as 'the snake lady.' It had taken Brunner quite some time to determine the origin of this nickname, which had only been revealed in a single letter Korvut had written to his sister. The first time he'd seen the homeless woman, she'd been standing under a tree on church grounds. He'd spoken to her briefly, then gone back inside the church. When he came back out an hour later and walked to his car, he noticed that she was gone but that something was lying under that same tree, in the grass. Closer investigation revealed it to be a long, thick, grayish brown snake—a dead one—that looked quite exotic and put a real fright into Korvut. He drove the carcass directly to Animal Control, which with the help of a nearby university later identified it as a puff adder, considered Africa's deadliest snake, one that should not exist outside of it.

There wasn't much more detail than that about the 'snake lady'; the striking thing about the diary was Father Korvut's writings about his travels to various libraries in the area, travels which got more extensive and expansive as they went on. His reasons for them were

maddeningly vague, and so Detective Brunner had looked into the priest's materials checkout records at scholarly libraries and theological seminaries. He was able to detect a pattern; the man kept checking books out farther and farther away from his home, on subjects ranging from drug addiction and schizophrenia to witchcraft. One weekend Korvut came to a seminary in Philadelphia, from which he withdrew books about ancient religious beliefs centered around the Middle East. At one point he'd requested photocopies of two essays from the late nineteen hundreds describing the obscure belief among some Babylonian tribes that the souls of the dead could congregate inside a single living human body for the purpose of resurrecting it. The timeline of his research coincided with the homeless woman's arrival in town, according to various people who had briefly seen Korvut in conversation with her.

From there, John started going through the stack of crime scene photographs. The scene was the church where Father Korvut conducted his services. In the wide shot of the interior, taken from the back of the church, it seemed totally empty, though looking hard, one could see that all the way in the first row of pews, a man was sitting, facing forward. The other photos showed this was Father Korvut, who'd been killed with two knife wounds to the heart, only slightly slumped over, as if he'd been sitting on the pew turned partially sideways, perhaps speaking to someone sitting beside him. He'd simply never fallen over. There were, my grandfather said, more than 150 photographs of him in this position. Looking more closely at the little details of each, he saw writing on the seat of the pew, about twenty-four inches away from Korvut's left hand, small writing that had been done in pencil, almost looking like a child had been bored. The police knew of the writing, but did not know its origin.

The style of the letters, which spelled out completely nonsensical, unconnected words, made my grandfather set the photos aside and light his pipe to calm himself. He called Terrence Brunner to see if maybe he had not yet left the area; he hadn't. My grandfather left his hotel in order to walk the twelve blocks across downtown Grantsville to the police station where Brunner was meeting with a colleague. He needed to talk to the man in person, because he recognized the letters the killer had printed on that pew from some faint writing his night visitor had made on the windowsill of his guest room in 1951. She'd taken a pen off a table and done it, making just three or four words out of nothing, and putting odd-looking accents over the h's and v's.

The streets were very quiet. My grandfather was walking across the little town square when everything around him started to lose its color all at once, the color bleeding out of every tree and street sign and car parked against the curb, and he began to feel sick to his stomach. He was seized with a heavy, dry cough, and he made his way to the closest bench, sat down, and put his head between his knees to settle down. A profound sense of dread then came over him. He sensed that something truly awful was about to happen to him, and he had just raised his head to look up and around to see if perhaps there was someone else on the street, or a public place he could run toward to feel safe, when suddenly his head was flung back, then forward again, as if an unseen hand had grabbed it. Forward and back, forward and back, until his neck was almost snapping, his head whipping up and down. He tried to scream, but he couldn't; he had lost all control of his body, which was almost flying off the park bench with the force of this bizarre seizure. It lasted only about five seconds, and then, dizzy and in great pain, he fell off the bench and onto the grass. No one saw his agonies.

After a minute he stood up, trying to regain his balance. Somehow he knew, he told me, that as long as he didn't take another single step toward the police station to tell them what he knew, he would be all right. He turned and began to walk back in the other direction, back where he came from, and with every step he took, more color came back into the world around him and

the pain in his neck subsided. Soon he began to run, and he was back into the lobby of his hotel in just a couple of minutes. The desk clerk offered to call an ambulance, but my grandfather said no. He told the clerk that if anyone called to be put through to his room, he should tell them he had taken ill. He made his way upstairs and collapsed on his bed, and he remembered weeping, knowing that he could never tell anyone about the woman, ever. He would send back the crime scene evidence without a note. By intending to speak of that woman and perhaps sending the police after her, he felt he had enraged something that was in control of her. He vowed at that moment never to speak of her to anyone, for any reason, in the hope he would be left alone. That night was the longest of his life, as he lay there and waited for that invisible hand to maybe return to strike him, strangle him, kill him. He went to church for the first time in his life two weeks later, and he fully embraced Catholicism that summer. He never stopped.

That's where his story of the woman ended. Decades passed, and nothing truly strange ever happened to him again. He wanted to correlate his peace with the events to his acceptance of spirituality, but he wasn't sure about it. He thought perhaps it was more about his refusal to act on his suspicions. He felt something sensed that he wasn't a threat. As he grew older, his memories of the terrible thing began to fade, blessedly, just like any other memories. He told me life was so long, so very long, that the human mind could learn to endure and bury almost anything; this world was populated by people who had lost children in accidents, and Holocaust survivors, but when life reached a certain duration, these things slowly, slowly faded. No matter how much they shook our beliefs, time inevitably did its work, and even though your experiences would never allow you to be the same, those slow decades labored in the dark field of the subconscious to overcome them. He dedicated himself to his work and his new family, and he simply never told anyone about what had happened. Until that night when he was 71, and he told me about it there on his back porch.

I was speechless for several minutes. Finally I asked him if he felt unburdened or, just maybe, worried that telling the story held some power. He shook his head firmly, said no, he didn't think so. All that had ended almost forty years ago. The fact that he had never encountered anything of a supernatural nature again led him to believe that he was safe from such things, and maybe, just maybe, there was an explanation of the events that lay deep within parts of his mind he'd never explored. Still, I told myself on that night that the secret would stay with me, which was only partially to honor him. Some of that vow was due to my own fears of the unknown, the specters that the story had raised of a realm beyond my understanding. It was just better not to speak of it; I felt safer.

That story was told to me in the year 1993. In 2012, my grandfather was ninety years old. We'd remained close, though I'd since graduated from college and gone on to have my own career as a doctor. I still visited him every year at Christmas; he continued to live on his own in Solomons, Maryland, a four-hour drive from Cumberland. One day last December I arrived there to stay for a couple of days, and we exchanged presents and had dinner like always. He was very healthy and of sound mind, the result of very studious and disciplined living. I took him out to a nice restaurant in town the night after Christmas. I had to start driving back to Boston afterward. We got in the car at the restaurant and drove to his house.

I remember that he had forgotten to lock his front door, which was not a big deal, as he sometimes just didn't bother; where he lived was very safe. We went into the house, and he told me to go down into the basement and take a box of toys there back to my niece and nephew. I went down the stairs into the unfinished basement. There was virtually nothing down there but a big table and a chair and boxes and boxes of mementoes. When I turned on the light, which hung from a chain, I saw that something had been written on the gray cement wall on the east side of the room. It looked like it had been scrawled in white chalk.

I stared at those words, at first not understanding what they meant because the first few of them were nonsensical scribbling, letters a foot high that didn't make sense. But below that there was an actual sentence. The words said, *Can you hear the bells?* A question. A feeling of such terror washed over me, I almost lost consciousness right there and then. I heard my grandfather's feet on the stairs above me, and I called out for him to stop. But something about the tone of my voice, so frightened, made him come farther. And so he and I both stood and looked at what was written on the wall. His face was stony. I could see where the white chalk had come from; it had been taken from a plastic tub of it that was one of the presents my grandfather had bought for my niece and nephew.

He said to me, 'It can't be, it can't be.' Without saying a word, I guided him back to the staircase and led him upwards, holding his arm tight so he wouldn't fall. We got to the top of the steps and walked quickly to the front door. We hadn't turned on the house lights yet except for the one in the kitchen, and I could feel the darkness pressing in on us terribly. The move to the door seemed to take forever. I didn't look left or right for fear of what I might see. I ushered Grandpa to the car and opened the door for him, and he got in. I slammed the door shut fast, and I trotted around to the driver's side, and I tried to make it so that Grandpa wouldn't notice me quickly glance into the back seat in case something was there. Only when the doors were locked and the engine started did I feel safe.

Grandpa asked me where we were going, and I said I didn't know. He said, 'Maybe she's still here somewhere,' and I nodded and we pulled out of the driveway. It was my intent to start driving us toward Boston, and we would never come back. Never. I wouldn't let him. Three turns through the neighborhood was a street called Peach Run, the road just a single lane, very quiet, and my headlights picked out a figure up ahead, a human figure. It was a small woman, moving away from us. When the headlights splashed across her back and flowed past her and she was caught in that circle of light, she stopped. When she did, I did too, hitting the brakes.

I looked for a second at my grandfather in the dark. His eyes were wide, staring through the windshield. The woman turned toward us. And then she began to walk toward the car. I told Grandpa not to move, but he had no intent of doing so. The woman was old, so very old. Her hair was long and dirty; she wore a plain dress that was almost more like a sack. She was wearing old tennis shoes. When she walked it was with a marked limp. My eyes went to her left hand, and there they were, there were the bells. Except they had become so old and rusted over the decades that they seemed to be a permanent part of her flesh, which was blackened all around them. There must have been a deep infection at one point, untreated, and now her hand and the bells were one mutated object. They made not a sound now. It had been sixty-three years since my grandfather had heard them in the middle of the night as he sat in his room, frightened of this same woman, who had never forgotten him.

She looked even older than her years, ancient, as sick as it's possible for a living human being to look. But at least she was mortal. She had aged. And eventually she would have to die, freed of whatever controlled her, freed of whatever horrible things she had done over a stretch of time so long I can barely conceive of it. Where had she traveled, who had she killed without

anyone ever locking her away somewhere for good? She staggered forward, three more steps, until we could see every detail of her withered body. She had no expression on her face, only stared blankly like a statue. I heard Grandpa emit a small wheeze as he began to have more difficulty breathing. I took my foot off the brake and hit the gas pedal then, and we swerved around her and sped up, and I took a sudden right turn that led us to the main road. When we got there, I drove us well over the speed limit to the highway, and we were on it in three minutes. I kept saying, 'It's okay, it's okay, it's okay,' and Grandpa said nothing. Nor did he say anything for almost two hours, when we finally pulled into a gas station. I turned off the radio, and he sat with tears in his eyes, gripping the door handle tightly. Finally he said he was all right, that he was okay. And he was.

He died six months ago, of viral pneumonia, only eight months after leaving his house that night, which neither of us ever returned to. He moved in with me and my wife and my kids, who were only too happy to have him. We told them there had been terrible flooding in his house. I let a real estate agent handle every detail of the sale. So my grandfather would never be left alone, I hired a full-time assistant to help him around the house, even though he didn't need it. He accepted the helper without complaint. And how many nights have I spent wondering how long it will take for that woman to die so that there's no chance I'll be walking alone one night and feel her presence, and turn and see that she's somehow found her way to Boston, wanting to demonstrate to me that she is not who I think she is. I'm not as mentally strong as my grandfather. I know it. I know my mind would break if she were to touch me, if she were to reach out to me in the dark with a hand that had fused with bells that would never sound again.

cult

My name is Geoffrey Stavros. In April of 2005, while doing research work on my master's thesis, I made an appointment at the Library of Congress to examine a 218-page volume printed in 1931 entitled, simply, *Observations of the Practices of the Light Herders*. The text was written by a man named Lukas Demetrios after two years spent living on a commune on the northern tip of Georgetown in what is now Dumbarton Oaks Park, just south of the U.S. Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C. Demetrios's account is the only extensive one describing the religious cult known as the Light Herders ever recorded. I wanted to use his text to illuminate my thesis on the witchcraft of primal cultures. I found out about the book through reading obscure scholarly articles about its origins. I was surprised to find out that a copy of *Observations of the Practices of the Light Herders* existed at the Library of Congress.

The book that was brought out for my inspection was tattered and poorly printed, and written in Greek. What I was really looking for was a page of telltale symbols that some believed marked the beginning of a nineteen-page description of rituals that no one outside the leaders of the Light Herders, and a primitive African tribe called the Gy Chulthu, knew existed. I was frustrated to find that these pages were not there in *Observations*. The book was mysteriously interrupted at page 188—in the middle of a sentence. Many pages had visibly been torn out.

When I asked about them, I was told that the pages might have been removed before the book was donated to the Library of Congress in 1960. No other copy existed, or so they claimed. So I was deprived of reading the only working human resurrection rites known to man.

The Light Herders numbered only about eighty or ninety when they came to America from Greece around 1917—chased out, some believe, ejected from the country entirely under pressure from orthodox religious leaders. There is little evidence that tells us exactly why they came to the states, though the Light Herders were often spoken of in Greece at that time with seemingly irrational fear. They were led by a man named Kelof Katcheves, who set down and organized their beliefs in a book called *The Songs of Interior Man*. They were pagans who seemed to wish nothing more than to live off what the earth provided while keeping their beliefs utterly private. The Light Herders never mixed with other people in the Washington area. They had their own school and own medical care set up on their land. They emphasized a life of slowness and quiet in deference to the pagan gods they believed in, engaging in group trances and meditation on a daily basis. They lived monastically and secretly.

Some of the rituals they carried out, according to Demetrios's observations, purported to physically move the moon across the sky for purposes of changing the weather, and the Light Herders were known to slaughter dogs and sheep not for sacrifice but to expiate the sins of the Light Herders themselves. To witness the pain of an innocent animal was considered so horrible as to be a cleansing act. They even raised some animals specifically for these acts. And the murder of another human being was considered a crime so awful that the soul of the victim itself was believed to be tainted with the evil it had suffered. Demetrios's memoirs provide an illuminating glimpse into the twelve-year history of the Light Herders in Washington. Only toward the end of the nineteen twenties did their strange society begin to fracture.

It began when Kelof Katcheves announced to his disciples that he had sinned against them by secretly carrying out forbidden rituals in an attempt to restore his sight, which was being robbed from him by glaucoma. These rituals were known only to him and qualified more as outright witchcraft than paganism. Katcheves's travels in Zaire around the turn of the century had brought him into contact with the small but dangerous Gy Chulthu forest tribe, known for their powerful sorcery, and he had adapted some of their rituals for use in light herder ceremonies. But this time, he revealed, he had gone too far, and he had failed, and for this he needed to punish himself to avoid a gruesome death at the hand of the Gy Chulthu magic.

Over the course of the next year, Katcheves starved himself to the point where his once robust frame was little more than a bag of bones. He wandered among his community a virtual stick figure, losing more and more of his sight each day, speaking few words to anyone. Then came the event that all but destroyed the Light Herders. One of their more troubled laborers (Demetrios's descriptions of this man made it obvious that the laborer was deeply mentally ill) strangled an eight-year-old light herder girl as she slept. Condemned by the society as a murderer, he was encaged.

Kelof Katcheves ordered the little girl buried, but the very next day he confided in those closest to him that her soul was damned forever unless she could be cleansed of the murder. She needed to be brought back to life solely in order to be more mercifully laid to rest and thus sleep peacefully with the gods. This would be accomplished using the rituals of the Gy Chulthu, which he had transcribed carefully two decades before and which he described to the other Light Herders in a meeting of the society. This is precisely where Demetrios's book is interrupted, on page 188, with the text of the Library of Congress copy resuming on page 207. The contents of the missing pages are not fully known, but over the course of several months I

was able to piece together rumors and myth to find out what Demetrios apparently wrote of the events that took place after the decision was made to bring the dead girl back to life.

First, the girl's body was disinterred and preserved carefully using the Gy Chulthu's secret methods of embalment. Then, according to Demetrios's memoirs, there commenced ten days of utter silence among the Light Herders. Even their daily work was carried out with a minimum of movement so as to make virtually no sound. No words were spoken, ever. The mentally ill laborer, still encaged, also said nothing, asked for nothing. When night fell, everyone in the tribe, young and old, brought sticks to a central clearing and began to lay them down to form a sculpture almost fifty yards long. This procedure went on for the full ten days, until a giant serpent-like creature of wood, leaves, and stone had been created, complete with crude eyeholes and a pointed tail. A hole was left in the center of it.

Then came the most gruesome part of the resurrection ritual. On day eleven, the cage that held the murderer was removed. He stood free in the center of a human circle while Kelof Katcheves recited almost an hour's worth of African text from memory. Twenty to thirty members of the tribe then commenced a soft repetitive chant that was repeated for a mind-numbing two hours. Demetrios then describes a sudden end to the chanting, at which point a woman stepped forward quickly from the circle and crushed the murderer's head with four blows from a heavy stone. In the stunned quiet that followed the man's utterly passive collapse into death, a dozen or so of the Light Herders savagely tore the flesh off his head with their bare hands. Demetrios's memoirs did not convey any shock at this, leading some scholars to believe that the Light Herders were indeed capable of things that had shocked outsiders in Greece to the point where they were run from that land entirely. The man's skull was then severed from his neck and cleaned with boiling water, after which it was crushed into a fine powder.

The body of the little girl who had been killed was then brought out from a primitive shelter in which she had lain. Even with the Gy Chulthu's preservation methods, there had been some noticeable decay. While someone propped the dead girl's mouth open, someone else poured the dust that was once her killer's skull into her mouth, filling it until it spilled over onto her cheeks. After this, both the girl and the remains of her killer were carried a quarter-mile into the clearing that held the giant wood-and-stone snake creature. The bodies were strapped together tightly. Demetrios actually recalled the sight of the girl's head bent over and resting on the stump of her killer's gaping neck. They were then lowered into the hole that had been left in the center of the macabre sculpture.

The Light Herders left and returned late that night. A giant bonfire was built. After much prayer and recitation, the Light Herders sat silently, no one sleeping until the first light of dawn cracked the Washington sky on October 26, 1929, two days after the stock market crash that ushered in the great depression. All over Washington, people were in a panic, but the Light Herders knew nothing of this. Their attention was focused utterly on that massive sculpture before them.

There was a rustling sound from within the sculpture as the sun rose. Branches and leaves were disturbed, fell away. And then a head appeared rising from the hole. Demetrios saw that it was the little murdered girl. There could be no mistake. Her mouth was opening and closing, and some of the rope that had fastened her to the dead man was still around her neck. She was also clearly not living, but rather a corpse that had come to life. The bonfire made her eyes, lifeless for two weeks by then, shine. Before the child could even emerge fully from the hole, two Light Herders advanced on her. They simultaneously drove spears through her chest. The corpse fell backwards. The men waited a few minutes, then pushed the corpse into the hole once more, covering it with sticks and branches. After that, the Light Herders left the clearing. They did not

tear down the snake sculpture for four months. By then, there was virtually nothing left of the girl or her killer but bones and dust. These were buried quietly, and the Light Herders resumed their lives.

Obviously the missing pages from the Library of Congress's copy of *Observations of the Practices of the Light Herders* contained details of the disturbing ritual. Demetrios's account of the end of the Light Herders is still in the book; he tells of many people leaving the cult and then the complete disappearance one day of Kelof Katcheves, who had become so weak with starvation that he could barely walk. He left a long letter written inside his copy of the *Songs of Interior Man* telling his disciples that the time had come for him to leave and never return. And then he simply vanished forever.

The answer to the question of just where those missing pages of *Observations* disappeared to could lie in an incident I uncovered through my research. In late August of 1991, decades after the demise of the Light Herders, the police made a call at a large row house on 18th Street in Adams Morgan. Daniel and Mary Worrell, both professors at George Mason University, had been reported missing by the college, never having shown up for the beginning of the fall session. Inside the house, the police immediately found evidence of a struggle and foul play, capped off by the discovery of a note written and signed by Worrell's stepson. The note said, *I have killed him because my mother deserves to live more than he does. I am very sorry.*

The police began to look for twenty-six-year-old Brian Roth immediately, but it took almost seven days to find him. He had locked himself inside an empty equipment shed on the grounds of the East Potomac Golf Course a few miles away and had obviously been living out of it during his time of hiding. All the murder evidence the police needed was there. The DNA of Daniel and Mary Worrell was recovered, but Brian Roth swore he had not killed his mother. Instead, he claimed she had taken an overdose of sleeping pills out of misery, and he had discovered her body on August 19. He confessed to killing his stepfather that same afternoon by stabbing him no less than thirty times in the chest. He had hated Daniel Worrell from the day the man had married his mother five years before.

Brian Roth was a schizophrenic who had spent a total of three years in various mental treatment centers in his teens. He withheld nothing when it came to defaming his stepfather, but he never gave the police any help in locating his parents' bodies. Two days after his arrest, he repeatedly slammed his head into the wall of his cell in the middle of the night. He lapsed into a coma that lasted almost three months, and then he died. Brian Roth had been highly intelligent all his life. He had been studying for a master's degree in anthropology when he murdered his stepfather. In January of 1990, his name had appeared on a request form at the Library of Congress, which was no surprise, as he spent much of his time there. The book he'd come to examine on that day, among others dealing with pagan rituals, was *Observations of the Practices of the Light Herders*. His was the last request of the book before it became part of a special category of the library's holdings that required an attendant to be present at all times during its use. This may prove that it was he who secretly tore out the book's key pages. Maybe he kept them hidden until 1991, when his mother's death actually gave him cause to use them.

Two days after he was taken to the hospital in a coma, the police found his stepfather's body in a trench in the woods of Montrose Park—just yards away from the original light herder settlement. Daniel Worrell had been bound to something—or someone—with rope, and his body had been covered in an enormous accumulation of branches and rocks twenty feet long. Inside his mouth were found faint traces of what was soon found to be a human skull. That was essentially the end of the story. To the public, it was just a ghastly murder of a George Mason University professor, many of the details of which they never found out about, since the police

kept them quiet, confident as they were that they already had the man who had committed the crime.

No one will ever make a connection between that case and a strange police report I filed six months later in the heart of the city. With it, I believe I became a very small part of this horrendous puzzle. I was walking home from work along Oakland Street in Arlington very late on a Sunday night in January when I saw a disturbance on a paved path just inside the grounds of Columbia Gardens Cemetery. The cemetery was dark, but the entrance was lit by a single overhead street lamp. I parted the large black gate and immediately saw what looked and sounded like a fistfight. Just a few feet shy of a row of gravestones, a deer was standing on its hind legs, clawing furiously and defensively at a person who seemed to be attacking it.

When I got closer I guessed, based on posture alone, that the person was a woman, and that she was wrapped awkwardly in whatever rags she had probably found on the street. And she seemed to be growling. She turned on me, and the deer, which had collapsed backwards onto the paved path, scrambled to its feet and darted off across the graveyard, leaving a thin trail of blood behind. The woman's face had been completely ravaged. She looked inhuman, like the worst-case scenario of methamphetamine addiction, possessing no teeth, her skin mottled and gray, and her eyes almost entirely blackened, with just a few spots of white still visible in her corneas.

She began to hobble away, but I yelled at her to stop. She turned around a second time and let out a shriek that sounded like it was coming from underwater somehow. I backed away, revolted, leaving her to stumble through the graveyard and go off into the night. I went to the police to tell them what I could just to settle myself, and to entertain the morbid hope that they might find the woman and discover what her awful affliction was. But because no crime had been committed, my report was likely forgotten instantly. The location of the bizarre struggle I witnessed gives me pause. The grave of Mary Worrell is located in Columbia Gardens. It has never been disturbed. One more thing: as I ran to the nearest police station that night, I made sure to commit to memory the one truly identifying characteristic of the woman's wretched clothing. Underneath a ratty brown windbreaker, she wore a George Mason University sweatshirt.

corpse

My name is Oliver Kraft. I am a patient at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C., and I am probably never going to get out of here while I live. I accept this. I am here because of the Grin Man, who most people call Strom Sullivan. Thirty-seven years ago, in 1969, Sullivan was buried in Glenwood Cemetery on Lincoln Road after he died in the electric chair in Tennessee. His great-grandfather, who he never knew, had set up a trust to make sure all the members of the family were buried in Washington, and so the body was brought to D.C. by train.

Strom Sullivan was a gambler and an occasionally violent con artist. In 1966, he lost three hundred dollars playing stud poker to a man named Hoffman. At the end of the game, they got into a vicious argument, and Hoffman's dog, a Doberman pinscher that had been sitting beside him during the game, attacked Strom Sullivan, going for his leg and sinking his teeth in deep. Two men had to drag the dog off him. That night, Sullivan limped a few blocks to the motel where Hoffman was staying, picked the lock on his room, entered, and decapitated the man as he slept, using an axe with a broken handle he'd found in a junk yard. Then Sullivan merely sat in a folding chair outside the room, with the door wide open, examining the wounds the Doberman had inflicted. He fell asleep in that chair, and in the morning, a maid walked past him into the room. She immediately ran out and shook Sullivan awake, screaming. His eyes opened, and he looked at her contemptuously and told her to quiet down. He said he knew what had happened because he was the one who had done it. He then got up and walked off, headed back toward his slummy apartment. The police came for him about four hours later.

He was convicted of first-degree murder and eventually electrocuted, and for years he lay alone, forgotten, and undisturbed in Glenwood Cemetery. But in 1991, an organization called the Project for Fair Detainment completed a long study of electrocution deaths in America in trying to make it an illegal form of capital punishment. One of the strongest parts of their case was the lesson of what had happened to Strom Sullivan when he was put to death. According to eyewitness reports that some had tried to conceal, the procedure had almost burned Sullivan's scalp off, and his hands had gone utterly black. The Project for Fair Detainment wanted to exhume his body, take photographs, and perhaps perform an autopsy as part of their evidence to show how horrible electrocution was. They got their wish, so in 1991 Strom Sullivan was exhumed. Three people were present when the coffin was opened at the city morgue, and they got a real shock.

The damage to Sullivan's body that they had expected was there—but the body was otherwise almost perfectly preserved after more than twenty years in the ground in the cheapest possible coffin. It was impossible but true. More disturbing still was the look on Sullivan's face. His eyes were wide open, and the coroner present wrote that his lips were stretched wide, showing teeth locked together in a freakish grin. The coroner described himself thinking that Sullivan was laughing at them, and wouldn't ever stop. The body was photographed, and the Project for Fair Detainment got what they wanted. There was no need for an autopsy because the body was so flawlessly preserved that it was visually obvious what the electric chair had done to him. Sullivan was then reburied in Glenwood Cemetery, in the same grave. The coroner had no explanation for why the body was in such perfect condition. He had seen such a thing once before, but in a zinc coffin in a family crypt with little exposure to the elements.

A year went by, and word got out about the mysterious condition of the corpse of Strom Sullivan. The medical department of Alouette University in Oregon got very interested in the body, wanting to study it to find out what could cause such a pristine natural preservation. Sullivan had no relatives left, so the university was able to get permission to exhume him once again as long as the body would be essentially unaltered after their studies and returned to the grave within three weeks. Before Sullivan's body was shipped to Oregon, its first stop was the coroner's office in D.C. again, where the coffin was opened for the second time. And sure enough, the body was still preserved. And Sullivan still had that awful grin on his face, his eyes wide open, staring. There was something missing though. Sullivan's left hand, mostly blackened by the grossly miscalculated electric shock that killed him in 1969, was gone from the wrist. Not much was made of this at the time. It was thought that it may even have fallen off when the body was exhumed before. The researchers at Alouette did what they had to do to the body, and two weeks later it was back in its grave. Again, no definite answer was found as to why the body seemed so outwardly alive.

Over the course of the next few years, a legend grew about Strom Sullivan's corpse, and how it refused to really die, and how year after year he lay there waiting for someone to dig him up so he could see another human face and laugh and laugh, happy to be dead, and mocking the living. If you grew up in the Brookland area of Washington around that time, like I did, there's a chance you may have heard his name mentioned, by kids probably, or around Halloween. A general store on Franklin Street called Elmo's, which closed in 1999, even kept a chair in one corner occupied only by a sign that advertised it as the actual motel chair that Strom Sullivan had been found sitting in after the murder of the man named Hoffman. The proprietor of the store warned people that anyone who sat in that chair would begin to laugh until they screamed—and then that poor soul's face would freeze that way forever. He said this to me many, many times.

In 2005 Strom Sullivan was disinterred for the third time. Two students from George Washington University snuck out to Glenwood Cemetery one night in June and dug up the coffin because they had heard about the legend and wanted to see if it was true, that this was a body that mocked death and life equally. They were fairly well-equipped, and after two hours of digging, they were able to lift the coffin out and set it beside the gravestone. Then they opened the newer coffin provided by Alouette University and joined the small group of the unlucky who had laid eyes on the fresh-looking body with its missing left hand, the right one partially blackened but intact. But they didn't get to see the terrible grin on Sullivan's face, because his head had been cut off. It was entirely gone. The students left the coffin right where it was and took off into the night, but being a little drunk, they left plenty of evidence behind and were arrested a few days later. This still left the mystery of where Sullivan's head and left hand had gone. It took a month to finally figure it out.

The mystery was traced to a part-time caretaker of the cemetery named Oliver Kraft, who is me. Back when I was nine or so, my father came home one night and showed me a photo he had taken at work. It was a semi-focused picture of Strom Sullivan's corpse, more specifically his grinning face. My father was an attendant at the city morgue. He occasionally used that picture to frighten me when I was bad. 'Look how the Grin Man is laughing at you,' he would say. 'He knows if you don't behave, you're all his.' One day I got hold of the picture and buried it in our back yard. But my father had something else to terrify me.

A few months after the picture was buried, I was sleeping in my room after being punished and sent there to remain shut inside it for three days. When I awoke in the dark, sensing someone

near me, I saw my father sitting in a chair beside my bed. He told me that a lesson had to be taught about forgetting to put the lid on the trash can when it was set out for the night. He leaned forward and placed an object on my pillow, beside my head. It was a blackened, severed hand. 'The Grin Man tried to get in here, but I stopped him,' my father said. I believed every word, even though I could smell the alcohol on his breath, a smell that always seemed to be there. I had to sleep that night with the Grin Man's hand on my pillow to remind me of how my father had protected me even though I had been so clumsy with the trash. I spent that night in and out of consciousness, lying on the very edge of my bed to be as far away as possible from the hand. Occasionally I woke up to see it still there on my pillow. When I awoke the next morning, the hand was gone.

From that time on, I knew that the Grin Man was always near. I dreamed about him three or four times a week. I never saw the hand again, but I knew that as long as my father was alive, the Grin Man wouldn't be able to hurt me. And he didn't. But then my father died when I was in one of the hospitals they put me in for killing dogs on the street and some other things. When I got out, I was almost a full adult, but I had no defense against the Grin Man. I was homeless for a while, but one day I saw an ad in the paper. Glenwood Cemetery was looking for a part-time caretaker. I knew the Grin Man was buried there, so I applied and got the job. Night after night, I stood over the Grin Man's grave. Little by little, I could sense him getting stronger. One night, when I knew he was close to getting out, I dug up the grave and sawed off the Grin Man's head and took it. I felt much calmer after that. I did a bad job of reburying the coffin, which made it easy for the students to get into it a year afterward. The papers said that there was one remarkable coincidence about my arrest. The police found me sleeping in a chair on the front porch of the group house I was living in—exactly like a motel maid had once found the Grin Man after he had decapitated the man who cheated him. I swear I didn't plan that. It just happened.

For a long time, I wouldn't tell the police where I'd put the head. But last week I developed an infection in my left index finger. I had to tell the doctors that when I sawed off the Grin Man's head, my finger had been lodged inside his mouth to hold it steady. The jaw closed all at once, and it bit me hard enough to draw blood. And the Grin Man was still laughing when it happened. Now my blood has been poisoned by his bite, even though it's been a year and a half since I touched him. They say the infection has nothing to do with that, but I know differently. It is probably how I'll die. They injected me with some kind of painkiller, and when I was weak I told them I buried his head in the National Arboretum on the edge of the Anacostia River. The Arboretum is spread out over four hundred acres, so I don't think they'll ever find it. There are so many trees and bushes and flowers there, it's impossible to tell just where I put it. The grin is still there on his face. He never stopped laughing, not for a second. I meant to dig a hole four feet deep for the head, but I panicked and I only made a hole eighteen inches deep. I put the head in facing away from the city so that no one will ever have to feel the Grin Man's stare again. I feel better about everything now. All I care about is that I'm cremated, not buried. I'm afraid there may still be a way for the Grin Man to get me if I'm inside the ground.

cabin

Note: The esteemed paranormal researcher Savid Doud, who was found dead under mysterious circumstances in a house in Belconsin, Maryland, in 2004, left behind several notebooks filled with notes he'd made detailing several proposed investigations. The majority of these notes seemed to have been meant for his colleague Aramis Churchton, who disappeared around the same time of Doud's death and is believed to have murdered the man in cold blood. Below is one such fragment from those notebooks.

In 1992 in Shreves, West Virginia, three young divinity students drinking a bit heavily after graduation from their master's program got involved in a car accident on a remote country road. Their car struck a young boy and shattered both his legs, and he was almost killed. The students were ordered by their scholastic advisor and elder to spend one week fasting and praying in isolation as atonement for the accident. The advisor's family owned a tiny cabin in the Appalachian Mountains to which the students would hike together and seclude themselves totally, meditating on the near tragedy all the while. The students hiked fourteen miles to the cabin, carrying two gallons of water between them and nothing else.

Two days into their period of atonement, one of the young men went into his squalid, unfurnished room and would not come out, would not answer when the others banged on the door and asked him what was wrong. Two days went by, and from inside his room there came only an eerie silence. The young man had a history of alcoholism and abuse in his family, and had twice committed himself as an undergraduate to a mental health facility in his hometown. The others finally broke the door down, for fear the young man may have committed suicide. But he was not inside the room at all.

In his place was a middle-aged woman, a haggard, pale creature with dirty black hair who only lay motionless in bed. Her filthy white dress was of a time period long since extinct. They begged her to speak to them, and with a great deal of effort, she finally did. Her words were slurred, as if she were drugged or had woken up after some sort of coma. She wanted no food, no water, only to sleep and be left alone. She said her name was Joana Tamner, and she was from a town in Massachusetts called Angier's Corner. She did not know how she had come to be there. The last thing she truly remembered was being freed from a prison cell where she had been sent for killing her baby. After that, she recalled only flashes of imagery from a long dark hallway in which she had passed a man who seemed to match the missing divinity student's description. Most of her answers were maddeningly vague.

Frightened, the students left the cabin and hiked back to the city. Their elder met them with a car to take them to the police. But when they told him their story, he stopped the car and told them, strangely, that he wanted to see the woman before they filed a missing persons report. They all hiked fourteen grueling miles back to the cabin. The priest talked to the mysterious woman alone. Based on what he heard over the course of a frustrating six-hour exchange with her, he contacted an old friend of his, who in turn put him in touch with a reclusive priest living in Manitoba. This priest had been defrocked many years before in a small scandal over his ties with a bizarre religious group called the Messengers of the Path. He had been hiding from police since 1975.

Working with the two divinity students and their elder, this Canadian priest, Blutaire by name, attempted to trace the woman's identity while she lay weakly in that room. Her physical

description and strange ramblings convinced them that she matched the identity of a child murderess who had been executed in 1884. The town of Angier's Corner had changed its name more than one hundred years before. Blutaire believed that the divinity student had in fact killed himself, and that this woman had taken possession of his soul to live again, while the student remained trapped on the other side, utterly in limbo, until his soul could be reclaimed. It was indeed the student she had seen in that murky 'hallway.' The Messengers of the Path were ostracized sinners—horrible ones, sometimes—who believed in these 'transferences' and sought to attain salvation by sacrificing their own lives to save those who were lost on the other side. The priest Blutaire contacted this mysterious cult and summoned two of its members to the cabin in the woods.

They came three days later to commence a long period of prayer and meditation that ended in a most horrifying way: through a ritual suicide in which one of the messengers would choose to die by suffocation in order to go into the beyond, ensuring that the divinity student's soul would have a chance to return to earth. Apparently, the messengers' actions worked. On a cold winter night in that cabin, one man killed himself while two others watched and assisted, and his body was taken away the next morning. The murderess, left alone in her room, was not there the following morning. She had disappeared. Nineteen days later, a twenty-three-year-old man stumbled into a roadside diner in Shreveport and collapsed. It was the divinity student. He had no recollection of where he had been for the past weeks, not even a flicker of memory of the cabin where he had taken his own life by slashing his wrists with a rusty bedspring.

This story was chronicled in the memoirs of one priest who knew of this occurrence and wrote of it in his journals before he died in Calgary two years ago. At one point, supposedly, the murderess escaped the cabin, and wandered through the woods for hours before attempting to break into a deserted natural resources outpost. When it was all over, Blutaire went back into hiding. I've collected enough information about the entire case to suggest we find the cabin sometime when spring comes.

desert

Note: The esteemed paranormal researcher Savid Doud, who was found dead under mysterious circumstances in a house in Belconsin, Maryland, in 2004, left behind several notebooks filled with notes he'd made detailing several proposed investigations. The majority of these notes seemed to have been meant for his colleague Aramis Churchton, who disappeared around the same time of Doud's death and is believed to have murdered the man in cold blood. Below is one such fragment from those notebooks.

There is a potential case that would involve traveling to the remote territory of the Australian desert known as the Kabaltra Sands, which has been very rarely traveled in the past hundred years. The desert is stiflingly hot, unlivable. But still it must be charted and mapped. This is done for the Australian government every ten or fifteen years. Gregory Kotean was a cartographer who went to Kabaltra with two other men in 1981 to camp and map the borders of the territory. In 1986 he committed himself to the Walburgh Clinic for psychiatric care and stayed there for a year. He died in a car accident in 1990. Shortly after his death, a number of

private letters to a friend of his were found. The letters had been written but never mailed. They revealed much about Kotean's state of mind inside the hospital and the six years previous. The doctors at Walburgh read the letters and found Kotean to be a psychotic. It turned out that the letters point to the real reason he had committed himself to the hospital, reasons that he never revealed to anyone. The letters themselves are lucid and well-written. In them, Kotean tells of his experiences in Kabaltra.

He claims to have taken at least two hundred photographs on the assignment there. Every one of these photos is available in government files except for nine, which Kotean concealed from the Australians and which have been seen by no one but him to this day. Kotean was the only man on the assignment to explore the infamous Sagittarius Caves, an area of the desert populated with dark caverns and miles of duneless hardpan. The area is approximately the size of Washington, D.C. Kotean rode out in a buggy on October 9, 1981, with another cartographer, Lawrence Masterman. The two drove about twenty miles away from base camp while the only other man on the mission, Jack Delphy, stayed behind. They spent a total of nine hours near the Sagittarius Caves. At about 3 a.m. Kotean went alone on foot through the dark, taking pictures for their research while Masterman stayed behind at the buggy to begin a topographical survey. Although they were in radio contact at all times, no messages were transmitted during this exploration.

Kotean's letters claimed that after walking just about three miles from Masterman's buggy, he caught sight of a curious dot on the horizon, one that he spotted between two tall rock formations. He estimated the dot to be about four thousand feet away, and he began to walk toward it. As he closed the distance between himself and the dot, he began to notice other dots on the landscape. It appeared that there were quite a few of them, spaced randomly in a smooth area where rock formations and caves were minimal. When Kotean was within thirty feet of the object, he gauged its height to be about six feet. Because of its uniform color, he believed it to be a rock formation. Then he shone a light on the object and was frozen with fear for several minutes.

It was a human being, a man. Kotean stated that this fact was irrefutable if one looked at his nine hidden photographs. The body was fully dressed but seemed to be painted white from head to toe. Kotean realized that the body was merely covered by sand that had frozen onto it during the onset of extreme temperatures. The man was wearing what had once been denim jeans and a lumberjack-type cotton shirt. His boots were rooted into the desert's surface. The man's eyes were open and petrified. His mouth was also partly open, and sand swept into it as Kotean watched. Kotean looked around him, and less than a mile away he saw a pair of other dots on the horizon. He did not relay his findings to anyone out of fear. It took him twenty minutes to reach the next corpse. It was a woman this time, still wearing a housedress. There was too much sand encrusted on her face to determine her age. With a pair of high-powered binoculars, Kotean scanned the landscape. He saw no less than three more forms on the horizon.

In the six hours that Kotean spent in the caves region, he was able to examine nine such corpses. The last body he studied was of a young boy who had been placed in position on the desert floor sitting bolt upright in a chair-like structure. Only after chipping layer after layer of sand away did Kotean see that the boy was in a wheelchair. Upon returning to Masterman, Kotean reported nothing. His unwillingness to reveal what he had seen was due mostly to a firm belief that what he had experienced was not real. When they left Kabaltra two days later and began their return course back to Sydney, Kotean hid the canisters of film he had taken of the Sagittarius Caves inside one of his boots. Three weeks later he was in Auckland, New Zealand, developing the film

on his own. For eight months, Kotean held onto the photos, not knowing what to do with them. Then one day he read a news report of a UFO sighting over a remote Russian town. He thought nothing of it, but the mental image of an alien spacecraft stayed with him for days, until he realized what he could do.

He flew to America and took his secret photographs to the NASA research base in Los Alamos, where the country's most extensive UFO library was kept. Most of the information there was unclassified. There was a fifty thousand dollar photo enhancer at Los Alamos, as well as something called the Sieve File, an accumulation of reports of citizens throughout Europe and America who had mysteriously died or disappeared less than six months after reporting a UFO. Kotean used the photo enhancer to identify the nine corpses in his murky photographs. On July 7, 1987, the Los Alamos computer printed out a photograph of a young handicapped boy sitting at home on his parents' farm. The boy's name was David Clearwater, and in June of 1933 he had reported seeing several bright lights in the sky above the farm. He disappeared four days later.

Of the nine people Kotean had photographed in Kabaltra, three appeared in the Sieve File. One man had vanished from Oslo, Norway. The woman in the housedress had disappeared from the south of France shortly after she claimed to have had her house explored by men with claws. Kotean's letters take up about two hundred pages and go into great detail about what he saw and what he thought. The conclusion he comes to is that there are beings and races beyond space who do not want mankind to intrude on their sphere of influence, and who have perhaps placed the bodies of the abducted in a small corner of the earth as a kind of warning, or perhaps simply because they have no use for them anymore.

Kotean's doctors agreed that he was delusional and exhibited classic signs of schizophrenia. His relatives and few friends lost touch with him after he entered the hospital following a nervous breakdown. He was on various medications between 1986 and the year of his death. One of the medications was Clozine, a semi-psychotropic drug that was withdrawn from the market after it was found that in addition to alleviating depression, it could cause hallucinations when mixed with high doses of common aspirin. No one ever saw Kotean's photographs. Their existence had seemed debatable. But in one of Kotean's last letters he claimed to have sent them to a close cousin in New York; this was about six months before he died. The cousin is still alive. His address is 141 Trout Hollow, North Collins. I wrote to him three weeks ago by registered mail. The letter has been signed for, but there's been no reply. If another two weeks pass, we must go there personally.

bargain

My name is Lee Kingman. One day in May I was sitting in Dell's Irish Pub telling Buddy, the owner, about how I was going to be evicted in three days if I couldn't scrape together enough money to pay my rent. I sat at the bar all afternoon and wondered what I was going to do. At least I was in from the godawful heat. There was another tornado advisory out; we were supposed to get hit hard with something later on that would hopefully cool things off. It was about six thirty when a guy sat beside me and told me he'd pay me serious money if I could give

him a ride out to Fulton and pick him up again the next morning. I'd noticed this guy sitting alone in one corner for almost as long as I'd been there, but at least I'd been talking to people. I suppose he must have been listening.

He was a real thin guy, probably in his thirties like me. But he looked pale and sick, and he was sweating a little even though Buddy had the AC cranked. His clothes were too big for him, too. He came off as homeless, and he didn't even tell me his name. He actually showed me the wad of cash he had, though. No wallet; it was just a bunch of crumpled ones and fives and tens in his jeans pocket. So I asked him why he couldn't just call a cab, since it was only fifteen miles or so into the city. He told me he needed a little help locking up a house as part of the deal, just ten minutes of work, but he didn't want to try to explain that to a dispatcher or a cab driver. It was incredibly important that he get out there by eight and be picked up again tomorrow morning. Nothing could go wrong. I was the third person he'd asked, and now he was out of time. Poor guy; he looked scared, and like he'd never smiled in his life. I got a strange vibe from him, obviously, but not a dangerous one. Two hundred bucks he was going to give me for this. I figured he probably realized I was broke, and so he wasn't about to rob me. I wanted a beer while I thought it over, but he was anxious to leave right then. So I said, 'Yeah, I'll do it.' Thinking back now, I remember Buddy watching us as we left, really watching us close.

We left and got in my truck. It was Short Line we were going to, the more industrial part of Fulton. He made me nervous just sitting there staring out the windshield. He was always looking up at the sky, and he got frustrated anytime traffic slowed down. There was a backup from something that had happened on 64. I asked him if he worked. He said no, not since he'd gotten out of the Merchant Marines. I was in the army for two years, so I asked him what the Merchant Marines was like and where he'd been. He said Japan, Sri Lanka, Namibia. He was on disability now, from an injury. I asked him if he'd gotten shot or something, and he got real quiet. I thought he was just going to ignore me. But he said, 'No, I was abducted. In Catengue. That was how I got hurt.' I didn't even know where that was. I figured it was better not to ask too much more, and he didn't seem interested in me at all. He was still sweating, and he squirmed there in his seat, wouldn't wear his seatbelt.

I asked him a bit about the whole deal with locking up that house he was going to. Only ten minutes, he said; it was just awkward because it took a second pair of hands. He asked me if I could drive a little faster. The guy was obviously developing a hell of a headache. At one point he lay his head against the passenger's side window and just shook it back and forth, like he was thinking, 'No, no, no, no.' Weird. He seemed to want to keep his eyes shut almost all the way there. He told me to let him know when we'd turned off onto Short Line Boulevard. It wasn't just that he was tired; obviously he was in a lot of pain. Two of the fingers on his left hand were taped, and I wondered if that had anything to do with it.

It was almost 7:30 when we got to where we were going, and it was almost dark. He pointed out a couple of turns near a railroad depot that had burned down when I was a kid. Just down the road from it was a little residential neighborhood on the edge of where a big steel mill was. A lot of woods all through it, woods that didn't even have a name, I don't think. For some reason two of the roads into it were blocked off with those long cement blockaders. I asked the rider what the deal was. He said the whole neighborhood had been bought by some big hotel chain and they'd booted everyone out last year. Eminent domain. So no one was allowed to live there anymore, and the blockaders kept the crime down since all the houses that were left were just sitting there. So I said, 'Then why do you still live here?' And all he said was that he just stayed in one of the houses when he needed to, which was tonight. He had me park the car in front of

one of the barricaders. We'd have to walk a few blocks to the house. That made me nervous, but what was I going to do?

He wanted to give me the first half of the money right now. He had me watch as he put the bills into the glove compartment. He said what he needed from me at the house was so minor, it wasn't worth waiting to pay me. This didn't mean I totally trusted him yet. I mean, he could knife me out there and take my keys or something.

We got out and began to walk down the road in front of us, which hadn't been repaved for years. There was already plenty of litter in the brush beside it. The little houses on either side of the road were all completely boarded up, the lawns crazy overgrown. There were even kids' toys sometimes that had never even been picked up. It looked like an end-of-the-world movie, like a virus had decimated the earth or something. We didn't hear anything but our feet on the road. We took a left, went down another block, and then a right. It had gotten a little too dark to read the street signs, not quite full sunset. One of the street signs had been knocked over. There was some graffiti on some of the houses, but not much. There were homeless people living in the woods out here where no one ever hiked, I guessed. I didn't see much evidence of boards being pried away. There was just no reason I could figure out yet for my rider to have even found this place. But still I kept my mouth shut.

There was a last turn, and then we were on the block where he wanted to go. The house was just as small and dumpy as all the others, its windows blocked off by cheap plywood. Reinforced with a second layer, though. I followed him up what could still be seen of the cracked front walk beneath the long grass, and he took a key from his pocket. The front door had been padlocked; it was something that didn't seem to have been done to any of the others on the street. He'd put this one on himself, looked like. He took a little flashlight out of his pocket, and he shined it inside as we went in. He held out a hand to me, like he was telling me to wait until he got a real light going. He disappeared into the dark, and then a lamp came on. It was sitting on a card table in the middle of the totally empty and stripped living room. There was absolutely nothing left in there. The lamp gave it a sad rusty glow now; it didn't even reach the far wall. He stood beside the table and I stepped in, but I didn't close the door behind me.

He said to me, 'Almost done.' Just two words, the first ones he'd spoken for a while, and they came out of his throat so hoarse it was like he'd suddenly gotten a bad case of bronchitis in the time it had taken to walk from the truck to the house. I noticed he was keeping his face away from me for some reason. It was obviously intentional.

I asked him what he needed with the locking up; I still wasn't understanding it. He had to say more words then, and they came out in that sick, strange voice with him looking away from me, toward the far wall. He put the padlock key on the table. His right hand was shaking bad. He told me to lock him in and leave. He needed to be in here because sometimes he got attacks real bad and got violent. But I absolutely had to come back and let him out tomorrow, absolutely had to, because he had no way out otherwise. His voice was almost entirely gone.

I started to say something, I forget what, probably some question about what he meant by 'attacks,' and he turned around and cut me off. He'd grabbed the key from the table, and he thrust it out at me. 'Lock me in,' he said, 'now, and go, right now; you have to get out.' And good God, I think I did, because his eyes scared me real bad. Something had happened to them. Not only did it look like he'd broken the blood vessels in both of them, but they were bigger somehow, almost bulging out from inside his head. One of his cheeks, the whole thing, had gone totally black and blue, like someone had punched him hard and left a massive bruise. His lips were shining because they were slick for some reason, coated in some sort of thick clear fluid.

It wasn't blood. Worst of all, what I couldn't notice from behind him but saw now in the glow of the oil lamp was that a lot of weight had somehow come off him above the chest, so that he looked far more emaciated than before, his skin pulled much tighter over his skull. I'd taken the key from him before I even really registered all this detail. His hand was ice cold. I turned and pulled the door shut behind me and I was out. I stuck the key in the lock and turned it and gave it a good yank. The lock was tight; the door wouldn't budge even a tiny crack. And I'm not ashamed to say I moved real fast away from the house and back onto the street. It was full dark now, but we had a full moon that night, so I could at least see my way down the road. I looked back at the house exactly once.

I hadn't memorized the way we'd taken to get there, so I did wind up taking a wrong turn. It only cost me a couple of minutes before I got my bearings, but my heart really started to pound. There was a bad moment when I came around the corner that I thought was taking me to the road that led right back to the truck, and I saw a house nearby that looked just like the one I'd left the rider at, and I thought, Oh my God, I just went around in a circle; I'm going insane. But no, I was on the right track. I walked fast, and my truck came into view soon enough. Way off in the distance I could see the lights of the steel mill.

When I was within twenty feet or so of my truck I just stood a little while, looking back down the road, feeling safe finally. I think I was just concentrating, getting my thoughts together, trying to get back the exact image of that guy standing there in that empty room and what had been wrong with him. Then from far away, somewhere in the center of the neighborhood, there was a single thudding sound, something heavy slamming against wood. It was like a sledgehammer striking something, or just maybe someone taking a running start at a wall, or a door.

I backed up toward my truck, waiting for it to come again. I got a bad jolt when I saw some motion down the road. Without working streetlights, it took me a good two seconds to detect what it was. Two dogs, running toward me, one lagging behind the other—not charging, not threatening, but like they were running away from something. They were veering off to my right. One big black dog, one smaller gray one, no collars. They shot past me and headed across the road.

I got into my truck and closed the door. When it seemed like that sound was never going to repeat itself, I started the truck and drove back toward Delgado.

I woke up in the middle of the night because all hell had broken loose outside my bedroom window. The thunderstorm had arrived, and it was a big one. The wind ripped into my trailer and made the entire thing shake. The rain pounded against the windows, almost making it impossible to see out into my little yard where the water was pooling everywhere, turning the whole thing into a swamp. Worst of all was seeing the trees out there bending so dangerously all over the trailer park, looking like they were about to snap. I couldn't do anything but sit on the edge of my bed and watch. At one point I thought to myself, That big branch over there is coming down any second, just over my neighbor's property. And sure enough it did; it snapped off in the wind and fell hard, nailing the bumper of his car, putting a huge dent into it. My trash cans had toppled over and been blown two lots away. Seeing the clouds moving so fast, I wondered what the hell was happening, and if this was it, this was finally the time Delgado would get hit with a tornado. But no, the worst of it didn't last too long, and we were spared.

My clock radio said it was a little before five when I lay back down. I couldn't get back to sleep, so I figured, why not go back out to Short Line? Why not go now so I could get there at around dawn? Then I could get it over with. As long as there was just a little light in the sky, I wouldn't be too creeped out. I intended to keep my commitment, even if it just meant unlocking the padlock and not waiting to see what that guy was like when he came out.

I got in my truck and went. A couple of roads were washed out near me, and almost no one else was out. Still, I got to that neighborhood near the steel mill a little early. I could see when I parked in the exact same spot as the night before that the storm had played havoc on the neighborhood, being so wooded. I spotted two downed trees even before I shut off my headlights, and I tilted my head back to close my eyes for another fifteen or twenty minutes. The light was slow in coming because it was going to be another ugly gray day. More storms passing through later, probably.

As soon as it was light enough to see by, I headed in with my umbrella. The storm had kicked a ton of grass and dirt debris all over the road, and I had to detour around plenty of puddles. You could see branches on the roofs of a lot of houses, and one tree had toppled over and nailed the side of one hard enough to totally destroy the gutter. Turning a corner, I saw that a huge oak had come down right into the middle of the road. I stepped over it. If there had been a car in the driveway opposite it, that thing would have been crushed.

And the house where my rider spent the night had taken a nasty blow from the tree in its neighbor's yard. It had come down and connected right where the pipe vent came through the roof, hard enough to create a hole there. I'm sure the rain was going right through it onto the flooring. The top of the tree had broken into bits that were scattered everywhere. But that hadn't been the slamming sound I'd heard, obviously.

I crossed the lawn and took out the key and put it into the padlock, balancing my umbrella in the crook of my arm. Before I actually opened it, though, I rapped on the door a couple of times, real hard. No answer. Just what I didn't want. So I went ahead and opened the door, and kept it open so I could see by the tiny bit of daylight I had.

That oil lamp had burned out. Nothing else seemed different at first, except the rider's clothes were all piled on the table. Shoes, socks, shirt, pants, every stitch. Maybe it had just gotten too hot inside.

I couldn't forgive myself if the guy needed medical help and I just left him there. I went through the living room and peeked down the short hallway that led back to the bedroom. No one there. I could hear the rain hitting the roof and the yard outside, and I could also hear it dripping on bare wood. Must have been the bedroom, so that's where I went. He had to be in there; where else could he be?

The rain was puddling in there on the old musty floor. All the furniture was gone, of course. The tree had hit the roof at the southwest corner of the bedroom. The hole was a little bigger than I thought; I could see daylight through it. But first I saw all the blood. It was everywhere around that jagged, splintered hole. The walls and even a section of the floor were speckled with it. And I saw what had happened right away. That tree had come down, making a hole in that roof, and then the guy, my rider, had tried to get out of the house through it. He'd climbed the wall somehow, but there was nothing around that could have helped him up. And the hole... it was just way too small, way too rough for a man to get out of. Maybe fifteen inches across. And so it looked like it had torn him up as bad as you could imagine. I moved closer. Mixed in with the blood was a lot of hair, matted dark hair. Everywhere. I kneeled down, and out of morbid

curiosity I put my finger on one of the loose strands on the floor. It was thick and tough. No way had it come from the guy I'd seen.

I left the house through the front door and went around the side, not even bothering with my umbrella. I actually walked under the fallen tree and looked up at where it had hit. There were signs of blood beneath my feet too, getting washed away. And when I got at a certain angle to the tree I could see it was on the tree too, on the bark all the way down its slope to the ground, as if the guy had gotten out of the house and instead of jumping to the ground, he'd crawled or maneuvered down the tree and then moved on. But that angle was brutal, worse than forty-five degrees, and in the kind of pain he must have been in, I didn't think he would have done something that strange. Unless he hadn't been... himself.

I followed the blood toward the woods at the edge of the back yard, but it vanished in all that mud and grass and running water. Naked and bleeding and probably in unbearable pain, he might have gone into the woods that probably went on for a mile or two before they hit either the highway or a KOA campground that was next to it. I told myself I'd go maybe fifty yards in and stop. I was in the middle of nowhere, soaked now, and God knew where the nearest human being was. This was pointless. Fifty yards and I'd turn around.

I swear as soon as I was deep enough in that the daylight was choked off, I felt that animal instinct in me that told me I wasn't entirely alone. As soon as I felt that, panic overtook it and I froze. The rain came down, masking any sounds but the drops hitting the branches all around me.

He was up ahead, on the ground, lying in the leaves. Face down. Naked. Like some serial killer's latest victim. What he'd done to wrench himself out of the hole in the roof had destroyed him, just as I thought it might. Parts of him around his midsection and torso were ripped and torn like someone had gone at him with a machine.

But thinking back on that moment, I guess I'll never be sure if that was what truly killed him. Because there was something else that had been done to him. Three bullet holes. Small caliber. Two in the upper part of his back, and another bullet had gone right through his hand. All three entry points were from the front, not behind him. I had to turn him over to see that, and look hard and long. The bruise on his cheek was gone. His eyes were closed. I wonder how close he got to whoever took him down, and if he was limping badly and crying out for help when it happened, or if just maybe he was charging, charging hard, terrifyingly fast, and if that hunter or hiker or camper or homeless man had seen something a lot different than anything he'd ever seen come out of the dark before.

I was stupid and I didn't go to the police, but I had good reasons I couldn't be associated with anything that ugly. I sealed the padlock on the house and never looked back. And I kept waiting to see something on the news or to hear a knock at the door that meant questions and explanations, but none of that ever came. Two weeks after I found that body, I went back to that spot just after dawn, figuring it was safe now just to look again. There was no sign of my rider anymore.

That was four years ago. Just a couple of Octobers ago they finally bulldozed all those houses and started putting a new development in their place. When I saw how they'd flattened everything, I finally believed I'd never hear that knock I'd been worried about for so long.

Last night I was the last customer out of Dell's at two in the morning. Sometimes I drive Buddy back over to his house down the road instead of him walking all the way. Just before he got out of the car he asked me if I remembered what happened when I gave a skinny guy a ride out to

Fulton a ways back. He knew I was lying when I said I didn't even recall that happening. Buddy said it was okay that I lied. That guy had been his brother. His screwup brother who had cut himself off from the family when he was 18 and then went into the Merchant Marines and gotten far worse somehow. Some injury he kept referring to, but it was something stranger than that. Buddy would have driven him that night if I hadn't, even though he'd tried to keep refusing and even had that very night, begging his brother to finally go to a hospital for his episodes to get help. If I'd wound up staying with him just a little too long and having to defend myself, that was OK with Buddy. So I told him the whole story. He cried a little. And we never talked about it again.

staircase

My name is Ron McCarland. After my divorce two years ago I was left living in a house that was way too big for me. Being there in that sparsely populated, extremely quiet woodsy neighborhood while I was trying to sell it made for a pretty bleak existence. Then there came a Sunday night in July when around 11:00 I made the usual trek around each floor shutting off the lights and trudging up the stairs to go to sleep. In my bedroom I checked my work email one last time, and then closed my laptop down and got into bed. I'd never had much trouble sleeping until Kristin left; now it sometimes took me an hour or so to drift off.

I think it was about 11:45 when I heard, pretty clearly, a creak on the stairs down the hallway. My bedroom door was closed, but it came to me nonetheless. I tensed up and lay perfectly still. A few seconds later, there was an identical sound, an identical instance, like a foot on the staircase. I could never fully describe just what that does to you, a moment like that. It felt like my body temperature rose ten degrees, and I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. You live your whole life, and then in one second you learn what it's like for primal terror to swallow you, mind and body. I waited about ten seconds more, and heard nothing. It was a tremendous effort to get out of the bed. I tried to do it without making a sound. I took three quick steps toward the bedroom door, and I slowly depressed the lock button, hoping it wouldn't click too loudly. Only then did I really exhale. I pressed an ear to the door. Thirty seconds, a minute. Then five. The difference between movies and real life is that in real life, I couldn't leave my place. I had to wait it out; there was no line or moment beyond which I felt safe, not after that vivid sound. And I didn't dare open the door. There are probably some who think I'm a coward, not realizing what a moment like that truly feels like.

It was almost twenty minutes before I moved back to my bed and sat on the edge of it. My cellphone was on the night table, charging. I reached for it and held it in one hand, muting it so there would be no ringtone if someone were to call or text me, unlikely in any case. One more sound, and I would make the call to the police. Not for a second did I doubt what I'd heard; all that was uncertain was what had caused it. I had no pets. The outer doors were all firmly locked, or so I hoped. There were two remote possibilities that I could accept—one, that the house was settling somehow due to some recent unpredictable weather, and two, that Kristin had somehow come back into the house; but why, why would she do that? I crossed the room and looked out the window. Only my car was in the driveway.

In the end, it was anticlimactic, just me sitting back on the edge of my bed for so long that my eyes began to close and I was drawn down into sleep. I lay on top of the blankets, clutching that cellphone. And I awoke to sunlight pouring in my window. Even then, I'm ashamed to say it took some time to work up the nerve to open the bedroom door; I made two calls to co-workers before I did, and one to Kristin, and worked into the conversation what had happened the night before. Before I left for work, I turned the TV on loud with the intention of keeping it on all day while I was gone, and then I very reluctantly went down into our finished basement. I didn't check around too much, getting a bit nervous down there. Heading out, I realized that my front door was unlocked. I must have left it that way when I'd been making trips in and out with the groceries. And so I was pushed even more toward making an awful conclusion.

Everybody at the office got the story from me that day, just to make myself feel better, really, but when I got home a little before dark my mood soured completely. How was I supposed to go in there alone and just drop off to sleep like nothing had happened? I sort of hated the people at work who had just listened to my story and empathized emptily; one of them even made light of it. I wished they could know what it was like to hear that creak on the staircase just once, when they were alone.

I worked at my dining room table until about nine, then tried to watch the end of a movie. Outside there were occasional silent flashes of lightning in the sky; it was oppressively hot and we were expecting some thunderstorms, but nothing serious had developed yet. There was a knock at the front door. I almost dropped my scotch, it shocked me so bad. I very reluctantly went to the door and looked through the eyehole. There was a woman outside, mid-thirties, looking pallid in the porch light, which made everyone look that way. It was someone I'd never seen before. I opened the door, but not quite all the way. She introduced herself as Karen, said she lived over on Grail Street, about eight blocks away, and apologized for the visit. But she had been approached by the person who lived next door to her to start a neighborhood watch committee because of some recent incidents people were concerned about. She was talking about prowlers specifically, and I invited her to come into the foyer to let her know that was something I just might have some knowledge about.

She thanked me for letting her in; she was on foot tonight and hadn't expected the rumblings of thunder off in the distance. There had been two break-ins that she knew about, both occurring when people were away, and in one case some things had been stolen. She was fuzzy on the details, and didn't even really remember the names of the people who had reported the break-ins. I myself knew none of my neighbors, really. She was using the suggestion of the watch committee to at least get out and know the people she lived close to. I asked her to join me in the living room so I could tell her the story of the night before, and she took off her cheap windbreaker and made herself more at home. She was a little shy, maybe not very comfortable around strangers. She reminded me of what people think of when they think of a cat lady. She was dressed frumpily, pretty much swimming in her old clothes since she was so thin and pale, and obviously didn't think much of herself physically.

We sat on opposite sofas, and I told her the whole story of the night before, from the beginning. As I went on, she leaned forward and seemed to be riveted to every detail, though she said nothing until the end, when she asked me where my wife had been, so I had to explain about the divorce. Then she asked something strange—if at some point when I was sitting on the edge of my bed and waiting to see what happened next, I had sensed something outside my bedroom door, if I had felt a presence of some kind. I wanted to say that yes, there had been such a point,

almost as if I had been detecting someone out in the hallway, our presences somehow connecting in the lack of sound and light, but I thought it might have been just intense stress and my body preparing me for a possible terrifying confrontation. Karen told me she'd had a similar experience once, but had never told anyone about it.

She asked me some questions about Kristin, what I did for a living, and how long I'd been in the area. We talked about the neighborhood; she had just rented a room in a house a couple of months before, wasn't even a homeowner. Twenty minutes had gone past since she'd come in, and I offered her a soda or some water, which she accepted. I went into the kitchen to get it for her, and we kept speaking, calling to each other from our respective rooms for a few minutes while I poured her a Coke and added ice. The last question I called out to her was about what she did for a living, to which there was no response. I assumed she hadn't heard me. I put the rest of the soda back in the fridge and turned to walk back into the living room.

Karen was standing in the entryway to the kitchen, smiling at me strangely. She had raised her hands from her sides up near her head and hooked them into claws, in a weird parody of a monster. She said, 'I'm the thing from your hallway,' and nothing more. I laughed it off, made some comment about how I wished it had felt that unthreatening. She held that position even then, still grinning like an eight-year-old might when trying to creep up on her kid sister. It was like she was waiting for me to try to move past, or laugh more heartily. But it was far too odd a thing to do that it just struck the wrong chord. I stepped forward and held out her soda glass. She took it and without a word turned and headed back into the living room. I followed her.

Karen didn't sit down again; instead she went to the window that looked out at the woods and stood at it. Still no sign of a rainstorm, though those flashes of harmless heat lightning were still happening occasionally. As if continuing a conversation I wasn't aware had even begun, she listed for me the names of the pets she'd had as a child, one by one, as she stared through the window. It was her long and awkward way of leading into a question about whether I'd had a problem with animals running through my yard. I hadn't. She told me I probably would sometime. She had often mistaken the sounds of raccoons and even deer for intruders wherever she'd lived, and the woodsiness of this neighborhood meant all sorts of things were running around in the middle of the night. She sympathized with my experience of the night before again and again.

I had a casual idea, and I mentioned it to her. I said I'd be glad to give her a ride back home if she'd participate in a little re-creation. I was wondering if I took my place inside my bedroom and had her walk up the steps, if I would be reassured that the sound she would make was too different to be what I thought it had been. It was something I genuinely did want to know, even though I already knew the stairs did creak if stepped on the wrong way; it was more a matter of whether the sound could travel that far. She agreed to do this for me, and I was able to use that offer of a ride to telegraph in a subtle way that our conversation had run its course. And so I set my drink down and pointed her to the staircase curving up to the floor above. I don't think I would have made the suggestion if I wasn't a tiny bit drunk.

I moved past her, going ahead, and in doing so I noticed something new about her. She was wearing a wig. I could see her hairline; the colors didn't really match. Her natural color was light brown, and the wig was much darker. It didn't mean anything in itself, but I got this sudden inexplicable image in my mind of Karen standing in front of that window in my living room, but in the dark, and reaching up to adjust that wig as she stared out. What had she been seeing

outside that window? I had only been in her presence for twenty minutes, but already I felt I needed to block her out of my life.

I told her to come about halfway up the steps and stay there, and I'd call out from my bedroom, and when I did, I'd like her to walk very, very slowly up the steps, just a few of them. I walked in and closed the door. I even sat on the edge of my bed to get as close as possible to the exact spot I'd been when I'd heard the creak. I loudly called out to Karen that I was ready. Nothing happened for a moment. I was just about to call again when I heard the first very soft step. She waited a perfect amount of time, then came up another step. The third, after even a longer pause, caused a noticeably louder creak, one that sent a chill through me. The fourth and fifth were just like that one, very clear, even from behind the bedroom door and down the hallway. It was true. It had been someone; I would have sworn it at that moment.

I got up from the bed and opened the bedroom door. As I did, I was momentarily confused because the light in the hall was different. Sometime after I had gone into my bedroom Karen had hit the light switch at the bottom of the stairs, and she was now half in the dark. Maybe trying to simulate too much, I thought at first. She was standing on the top stair now, very still. And she had, for the second time, raised her hands up near her head. The monster claws were back, that sick parody that wasn't funny at all, but childish and inappropriate. Her grin was wider now. She said nothing, just stared at me from down the hall, a little off balance, like she was trying to remain perfectly fixed for my observation, or trying to look like a sinister figure in a wax museum.

For the first couple of seconds as I took in the sight of her standing there, my mind didn't register the most striking thing about her position. Not until I noticed her feet did it hit me. She was standing to the far side of the step. She had climbed them by keeping extremely close to the edge nearest the wall, off the narrow strip of carpeting covering the middle of those stairs. It should have been obvious to me when she was on her way up. But why would she have done that? Why would she have known to do that, that only walking on the bare wood would produce the exact sound I'd heard? I hadn't described it in any detail. A person would have just assumed she should go up the center. I waited for her to say something, but she just showed her yellow teeth in that awful grin, her skinny fingers held out threateningly like a monster from a child's primitive nightmare. Why wasn't she asking what I thought? I nervously muttered some thanks, but I found myself unable to walk forward, not until I saw how she reacted. She giggled a little, but didn't lower her hands.

I found myself telling her that I had to make a quick phone call, but I'd meet her downstairs in a few minutes, and she could make herself at home. Then I withdrew back into the bedroom and shut the door without waiting for a response. And for no reason I could fully define, I pressed the lock button on the door inwards, just as I had done less than twenty-four hours ago. I backed up a few steps and sat on the edge of the bed. I didn't have my phone with me; it was downstairs, and I'd long been without a land line. I didn't hear the steps creak again, which would have meant Karen was headed back downstairs. I found myself looking at the bottom of the door, to detect a change in the shadows underneath it, meaning movement nearby, but it was too dark in the hallway now to do that.

What happened then was a change in the air somehow, a thickening, and I sensed fully what Karen had been talking about before—that sense of presence, of connectedness to someone I couldn't see on the other side of the bedroom door. I held my breath and leaned forward, my eyes rooted on the crack under that door. When sound came, I flinched. Karen was twisting the

locked doorknob. When she realized she couldn't get in, she spoke. She said she was the thing from the hallway, come to get me. And then she addressed me by a name that was not mine. Not even close. She had me confused with someone else. She told me through the door that if I wouldn't come out, she would come back when I was less bloody. Those were the words she used.

Now I heard her moving down the hall. The discrepancy in the volume told me she had tried to be stealthy when she'd approached. Then, her footsteps on the stairs, softer now; she was on the carpeting. The worst moment somehow was when I could hear nothing at all. Even though I knew she was far away from me, not knowing her precise location was terrible. But then I thought I could hear the front door open, and I definitely heard it shut, hard. I quickly opened the bedroom door and went to the railing and looked over it, down on the foyer. Though there was nothing there, I didn't yet fully trust Karen was gone. I moved fast the other way and turned the L-corner that led to another bedroom and the guest bathroom across from it. Keeping the light off, I went to the window in there, which looked out over the front lawn. And I saw her down there. She was walking down the driveway. She kept going, out onto the road. I lived at the end of a cul-de-sac, and there was only one direction she could walk. From my house, Grogan Road led on a perfect rising straightaway for almost a half-mile. To get back to the intersection that would lead toward the center of the neighborhood, she had a substantial walk. There were only two houses on either side of the road back here where we were all surrounded by the woods bordering a state forest.

I could breathe easier now that she was gone, but now I was not convinced of anything she had told me. And I felt she might be dangerous. I went downstairs and picked up my cellphone and kept it in my right hand as I opened the front door. Karen was almost out of my sight by that time, disappearing down the middle of the street, walking through the dark. Before her image got totally away from me I went out, intending to follow her, just a little ways. I was waiting for some feeling that I should perhaps call the police. But I wasn't sure exactly what to tell them, whether I should lie and tell them I was certain this woman had broken into my home, when I still wasn't. I would wait for the smallest sign or indication that I should let my paranoia fully out.

I was able to trail her and still keep well enough back that I didn't feel at all threatened. She walked steadily and on a direct path right down the center of the street. She passed the Bowmans' house on the left, not giving it the slightest glance. Well up ahead on the right was the Triplets'. The heat lightning flashed only once in the sky, and the air seemed stable, but the wind was strong. I realized when Karen walked past the Triplets' as well as the turn onto Karnow Street that she had not come from where she said she had. There was only one more house on Grogan, all the way in the cul-de-sac on the other end. I didn't know those people; I just knew that they were a married couple. Karen kept on a direct path toward their house; when the upward slope ended and we had both crested it, it came into view in the distance. I looked briefly down at my cellphone to confirm it was more or less fully charged. I slowed my pace a little because I sensed myself pulling a little too close to her, wanting to keep a good fifty yards behind her. On either side of us now were just woods. Maybe, I thought, she would veer off at the last minute and head into them. Maybe she would get to the driveway up ahead and walk around the house up there, where there was a footpath if you went deep enough into the trees, a trail leading north toward a small park. There was a single light on in the house, in an upstairs room, and one car, a minivan parked in the driveway.

I stopped where I was just over the top of the slope that led down toward the house, and I watched Karen go towards it. She never moved faster or slower; there was just no variation in her path or her pace. I registered the fact that she was not wearing her black windbreaker; she must have left it in my house, an awful thought. She walked onto the driveway, past the minivan, and finally turned just to traverse the sidewalk and go up to the front door. She still didn't see me. She knocked on the door, and then waited patiently. Someone opened it. It was too dark and too far away to see more than a shape. There seemed to be a conversation, words back and forth, just enough to tell me that Karen certainly didn't know these people. And then, the person in the doorway stepped back and let her inside. The front door closed and I was utterly alone on the street.

I called the police then, still feeling uneasy about it, and unsure what I would be accusing this woman of, but the feeling I had in the pit of my stomach was undeniable. My call was answered quickly. As I walked very slowly forward, I told the dispatcher that if they had a squad car in the area, there seemed to be an unbalanced woman walking the streets, and she had just been in my house, where I came to think she may have been the night before, trespassing inside it. I said I had just seen her go into an address where they didn't seem to know her. I was very clear that she had committed no crime in my presence. I wanted to sound very rational. I was told there was, in fact, a car in my area, and someone would drive past shortly. I kept walking, looking for signs of life inside the house at the end of Grogan Road. Something that didn't make sense was that no lights had gone on, as you would expect when a visitor is accepted into a home. The front window remained dark, the curtains closed almost all the way. I didn't move closer than the curb, and even then I moved off to one side of the property, as if I were out for a smoke near the woods. It took me maybe five minutes to get there, during which time nothing changed. Karen didn't come out. I stood there, feeling an occasional droplet of rain. The wind was starting to get stronger.

I heard the sound of a car behind me. Headlights came over the hill; it was the police, come already. When the car caught me in its headlights, I lifted a hand and waved. The officer parked at the curb and got out to greet me. He was a polite, older, crewcutted guy. I apologized in advance if I was overreacting, and very briefly told him a sketch version of the story. He said he would just make sure everything was okay in there and that I could wait at the curb. I prepared myself for mortal embarrassment, but was almost hoping for it now. The officer went up to the front door, making some comment into the tiny mic attachment on his shoulder, and knocked. No answer, for what seemed like almost a half minute. Instead of knocking again, he turned the knob and pushed the door inward just enough to poke his head in. I heard him call out a hello, but I didn't hear any response. He moved completely into the house, not quite shutting the door behind him all the way.

There was a point at which I just couldn't stay by the curb anymore, because he'd been in there too long, too long. It couldn't be that nothing should change in eight minutes, ten minutes. I made up my mind. I crossed the lawn and went up to the door, which was still partially ajar. Poked my head in, listened. Silence. I moved into the dark foyer. Like my house, this one had a big sunken living room to the right, a staircase to the left. The only light was coming from an upstairs hallway that was hidden by the twist of the stairs; that light was the only one I myself left on when I went to bed every night. So that intruders might think someone was awake up above, and not vulnerable. There was not a sound, not until a burst of digital noise from above and the voice of the police officer speaking into his radio, words I couldn't make out. Then, the thump of heavy feet descending the stairs, fast, too fast. Before I could even backpedal in fear

he appeared, his gun held outward, ready to shoot to kill, lowering it only a little after determining in a split second that I was not the one in this house who would harm him.

Until the other authorities arrived it was just that man and me in those thick, deep woods behind that house, he not allowing me more than a few yards from his side as we tried to spot a single shadow in all that darkness. It was only five minutes until the assistance came, lots of it, and I was pulled away from the chaos to be made safe and begin to answer all the questions they had for me. When I first saw the crime scene photographs in the courtroom months later, my first thought was how lucky I'd been that night not to make even the slightest ascent up that staircase and see the bloodstains that began just beyond my view from the foyer. It was horrible enough that when the police finally left my home at three in the morning, I realized I'd completely forgotten to mention the black windbreaker draped over my sofa, the one that belonged to that intruder, that deeply deranged killer who'd lived less than half her life outside a mental hospital. It was an accidental souvenir that I had the detectives make a special trip to return for, unable as I was to even touch it for fear I might get an overwhelming visceral flashback of the woman who had made a two-night game of stalking me, only to release her venom on someone even more unsuspecting.

sleep

My name is Ronald Simowin. At the age of thirty-eight I suddenly found myself alone in the world when I saw on Facebook that a cousin of mine had died. I had no relatives left, not one. I decided to hire a genealogy service to learn more about a couple of people I didn't know much about. The one who interested me most was an uncle I'd never met, Uncle Andrew. He'd done two tours in Vietnam and was discharged, but he died even before the last of the American troops were pulled out. The service found out that it had been a suicide, which I hadn't known, and they even gave me a short list of living men who had apparently served in his last unit. I decided to write to them all, just to learn more, as I was managing to accomplish with some other relatives. One of the men wrote me back, and he even said I could drive up to see him if I wanted to hear about Andrew. So one weekend I made the three-hour trip up to Keading and met this guy named Porter. He lived alone in a small dirty house, and had a long white beard. His emails were kind of terse and not written very well, and in person he was a little cold, like he'd maybe changed his mind and I was intruding on him.

Almost the first thing he did was take me down into his basement. And there was something there that was kind of hideous. At first I thought it was a big model train set. A few years back he had actually tried to re-create a mountain village that his infantry unit had passed through one morning. This was where my Uncle Andrew and some other guys had been badly hurt. Porter had bought fake terrain and hills and grass and moss and dirt and laid it all out very carefully—and there they were, the men who had been there that day, June 1, 1969. Little plastic

painted figures headed in a column down a path that went up a slight incline and ended at the village, which was just a few six-inch buildings made of wood and wicker, and some huts that were part of a kit Porter had bought. I thought maybe this project had been suggested by someone as therapy, but no. He said he just liked to make things, and that made it even stranger, standing there under a bare bulb beside him, looking at the little details. In his display, the unit was about five minutes away from the disaster that had hit them. It was just after dawn and the village had been deserted, he said. They'd been suddenly surrounded by a weird dry gray mist blowing through, dust and sand kicking up in a heavy, oppressive cloud, reducing their visibility. All they could hear was the bits of sand flitting off their helmets and their guns, like static electricity. Porter had been their CO, and he'd commanded them to stop walking and stay close together until it blew over. They'd just stood there. Porter saw faces and silhouettes of his fellow soldiers for a few seconds, and then they were swallowed up again in that mist. He got so paranoid that he went down on one knee to feel safer, closer to the ground. Some of the others, including my uncle, did the same. Porter remembered hearing a strange bird screaming off in the distance, a sound not quite like one he'd ever heard before. And then a shape had run past them, seeming neither male nor female, and it hurled a sack in their direction. And there was a loud slapping sound and Porter was knocked backwards by some kind of blast. He started to hear yelling and screaming. He would never forget a guy named Corporal Grieg. When they got to him, Grieg, who was twenty, was leaning back against a hut, his chest torn open. But when he was approached by the medic, or by anyone, he put a hand out and refused to let them come close. He said, *Stay back, all of you. No one touches me. I don't want the living touching me.* He was obviously in deep shock, but he began to actually fight people off. And a few seconds later he was dead. My Uncle Andrew had been hit in the stomach and was rushed to a mobile hospital. The surgeons saved his life. But then, Porter said, they'd made it worse.

Andrew had come awake during the surgery because the anaesthesia hadn't been calculated right. He actually felt the doctors pulling and tugging at his insides, though there was no real pain, only intense pressure. But he heard the sounds of his body's components being shifted this way and that. His eyes were taped shut and he'd been paralyzed by the anaesthesia and he had no way of even lifting a finger or blinking to let them know what was happening. His mind was screaming desperately but they never knew, and he was caught in that hell for many minutes. At some point he lost consciousness again. Porter had been his friend and so he knew the whole story. My uncle was a basket case from the moment he woke up in post-op. They had to keep him under heavy sedation because he would flail about so bad it threatened to destroy the work they'd done on his stomach. He was flown back to the states and on the trip over he became catatonic. They managed to get him out of it, but after his wound healed he went into heavy therapy. Porter arrived back in the states two months after my uncle and he went to see Andrew at the VA. Porter knew my uncle wasn't going to make it the second he saw him. Andrew had lost a ton of weight. He couldn't ever lie down to go to sleep because he had horrific visions of the surgery. I'll show you something, Porter said, and he brought out an old photo album he'd dug from his archives after I'd written to tell him I was coming. Uncle Andrew's dreams had been filled with the sight of the man who'd given him the anaesthesia back in Vietnam, even though he'd never seen his whole face. And he would draw that face sometimes. From the photo album, Porter handed me a yellowed, torn piece of notebook paper. My uncle had truly drawn the face of a vampire, a man with strange eyes and a sharp nose and teeth like shards of glass. *That's him,* he would say to Porter in the hospital. *If you see him on the street, I have to know.*

He was in and out of the VA when he wasn't living with a girlfriend who tried to take care of him. He began to keep a diary in October of 1970. Porter had read it all, and he had kept it so

no one else would read it. Andrew's insomnia was chronic; he couldn't work, he could barely eat. He became paranoid and wanted to keep a gun with him. His final descent began on one winter's night when he was tossing and turning in his room. He'd gone downstairs to make himself some tea, and he got as far as the hallway that led to the kitchen when he saw something in the pitch dark which froze him. There were three shapes there, and he saw that they were trees, of varying heights, with the tallest being about seven feet high. But they had no tops or branches. They each tapered off at the top as if someone had chopped away whatever had once been there. They stood right there in the hallway. Silent, almost featureless. Andrew had backed out of the room and gone back to his chair in his bedroom. Porter and I were out in his back yard by the time he told me this part, sitting in folding chairs as the dusk came. I asked him, What did those trees mean? Those were the surgeons, Porter said. Andrew had heard three voices when he'd awoken under the anaesthetic, voices talking during the progress of the surgery, and Porter was pretty sure those trees were how Andrew perceived them at that point: as things that wouldn't help him, just hold power over him. The diary entries got more random and fractured as time went on, and then at some point, Andrew had killed himself. I asked Porter where, and how, but he said he didn't know. He was lying and I knew it, but I didn't press him. I could get that information easily enough. For two more hours he told me of the better times the two of them had, but that all just couldn't stay with me as much as what Andrew had experienced there on the operating table, and what it had done to him.

I gave the genealogists more money and it wasn't long before they came up with what I wanted. A notice in the Strawkeller newspaper, dated January 11, 1971, about a body found in the woods near something called Grocer's Pond—a suicide, a man named Andrew Simowin. A single gunshot to the head. Why there? I wondered. It was close to where he'd been living, but not that close.

I've been accused of having an obsessive personality sometimes, and I really needed to know what had happened, just as I felt I needed to know why a distant great aunt had once been tried in Connecticut for corrupting the morals of a minor. So I drove to the little town of Strawkeller, late one cold gray afternoon. I parked my car and walked a half mile into the woods. Grocer's Pond was only twice the size of a baseball diamond, really. I walked all around it, thinking of my uncle. There must have been something about this place that had drawn Andrew. No walking paths were near, and it seemed too close to some houses to be a hunting spot. The pond had no significance in history that I knew of. The water in the pond was black and still.

It was only when it was starting to get dark and I was headed back to my car that I saw it, looking to my left. In what could not quite be described as a clearing, just a slight break in the foliage, there were three short trees close together, their branches and tops gone, chopped away. They had been treated with oil and sealant to preserve them against the elements year after year. A small stone plaque had been built into the earth before them. This was a small, almost secret monument, built in the year 1955, to the three victims of a school fire in Strawkeller.

This is where Andrew had done it; I felt confident about that. Maybe he'd knelt before them. Whether he had seen this monument before he'd begun to be tormented by its image, or he had stumbled across it long after, crystallizing his agony perfectly, his diary apparently never said. Those trees were so featureless, so dark, so silent. They were whatever was projected onto them, but more somehow. It was full night when I finally went away from there.

There came a Sunday not long ago when I was out kayaking alone near Deacon Falls. I was skirting the edge of some grade four rapids, trying to push myself a little, when I realized things were getting way too rough and I slowed myself pretty suddenly. Turning in the kayak, I caught sight of something coming at me out of nowhere from behind, another kayak that looked like it had no rower. I yelled out and it struck me and the force knocked the handle of my paddle back against my forehead hard. I blacked out for a second, but I heard the sound of the kayak hitting mine, sending it sideways. I recovered just in time to keep myself from flipping over into the rapids. The other kayak skewed sideways and was carried on down the river, headed for the falls, and nothing was going to keep it from going over two hundred yards away. I tried to focus on keeping afloat as waves of dark and light alternated and I came close to passing out again. Barely conscious, I managed to steer myself out of the roughest patch and finally make it to the shoreline, where I crawled out of my kayak and collapsed, clutching my head, blood all over my hands. Some people were camping very close by and they helped me up and to the hospital.

I was kept overnight and they had to give me a lot of tests. I responded just well enough to where they couldn't really keep me. I was literally gathering my clothes when two police officers came in to speak to me. A badly damaged kayak had been found at the bottom of the falls, and so had a human body. Before the horror of that could sink in, they explained things to me. Someone had stabbed a man to death, an accountant who lived near the river. His wife had already been arrested. It turned out she'd hired someone to do it and dispose of the body so she could collect his life insurance and run away with her lover. They believed the body had been placed into that kayak and pushed down the river. It had most likely been in the kayak, stuffed into it, when it collided with mine. I couldn't tell them anything, of course, and the whole thing never came up again. It was only a bizarre epilogue to my injury.

I slept poorly the next two nights, and I suffered a couple of pretty bad headaches as the result of my concussion. I dreamt of those trees beside Grocer's Pond, dreamt I was lying on my back, strapped down between them, looking up at them, upside down. They towered over me. The sky above them swirled with clouds. After a full week away from work the headaches seemed to be subsiding, but on the bus going there on Monday morning the worst one of all came very suddenly. I wound up having to get off and walk into the first dark place I saw, which was a very old and very small laundromat on a side street, one that seemed totally empty. It had a couple of chairs and a soda machine, so I bought a ginger ale and sat there, trying to calm myself, worried I might be getting worse. Exactly one machine was active, a dryer, but no one was in sight.

What happened, happened no more than five minutes after I sat down. The front window looked out on a quiet street, and looking through it I noticed the wind pick up. Very quickly the visibility through the glass became tinted and some kind of light low cloud moved in from the east, like a fog rolling over the street. There came a hesitant tapping sound on the glass like a thousand tiny stones brushing it and I saw it was not fog out there but a cloud of dust that became more and more dense. I'd never seen anything like it. In a horrible way I was reminded of the videos on 9/11 of billowing waves of debris darkening the streets. The cloud blocked out most of the daylight and sixty seconds later I couldn't even see the cars parked out there. It was so quiet, that was maybe the scariest thing. Aside from the dirt ticking against the window, no sound at all.

Something else came from the east. It came down the sidewalk just outside the window. It was a wheeled gurney, a hospital gurney. As if someone unseen had pushed it, it rolled on wobbly wheels and stopped out there just a few feet away. I could even see a small tear in one of the flat cushions; it was that close as the dust drifted over and past it. The cloud began to dissipate. When other objects started to become visible again—a fire hydrant, the sign of the used bookstore across the street—the wind blew up once more and the gurney was pushed on. It bumped against the side of the building and was angled back down the sidewalk. It rolled past the window and was gone. Within seconds the dust followed it. A car passed by. It was just the street again, like before. At some point during the episode, the dryer far behind me had stopped. When my hands stopped shaking I left the laundromat and got on a bus and went home. No sign of that gurney. My head felt better. I sat in a chair with a cup of coffee for hours, trying to picture it all the way it had happened, as many times as it took to confirm to myself that it had been real.

I found I was less stressed the next three nights and could get to sleep faster if I sat upright in a chair. Lying down made me paranoid. When I was lying down I felt vulnerable and I became convinced I'd dream of the trees again. The phone call I expected came very shortly after that. It was Dr. Stavros Katsaros, the man who had released me from the hospital. He wanted to talk about the rather startling things that had been noticed in my family medical history. It was something I'd never given them, but they'd found out about it anyway. I should have given them a false name at the emergency room so they couldn't research all that electronically. But I hadn't been thinking correctly. Now Dr. Katsaros started asking me lots of questions about how I was feeling, and he was trying to get me to come back for more tests and to fill out a more complete medical history.

And I did return for those tests. When Katsaros asked me why I had been reluctant to volunteer my family history, I told him I'd had enough of people trying to save me. If the aggressive, sinister strain of mental illness that had destroyed almost everyone in my family before they reached the age of forty-five was going to come for me, so be it. I would not be studied like a freak. I didn't care how much could be learned from me. I just wanted to be left alone. He pretended to be patient with me, but I could sense his frustration. He was a young guy, in his mid-thirties maybe, with cold blue eyes, almost gray eyes, and a shaved head. Humorless, not one for talking much. Calculating, you might say. The tests were very expensive but those costs would be taken care of, said Dr. Katsaros. Another MRI, a different kind this time, and something else involving some machine he had to explain to me.

The results of those tests came back quickly. I had some minor tissue damage. Surgery would be advisable, as soon as I could schedule it, to make sure I wouldn't suffer a clot sometime down the road. My family history made the long-term results of my accident even more unpredictable. The frontal lobe was still a mystery to medical science. I told Doctor Katsaros about my uncle, and that I'd read the statistics about people coming awake under anaesthetic and that I would never, ever allow myself to be put under. He said he understood but I shouldn't worry since it was becoming a rarer and rarer phenomenon. But he could not deny it was a possibility. True, he told me, what made us reach that twilight state, and why we came back from it, and what we really experienced during it were all not quite understood. How, then, could I be assured that a resistance to anaesthesia wasn't even genetic somehow, how did I know? How did I know I wasn't predisposed to waking up like my uncle did, then being driven slowly mad by the post-traumatic stress? Haunted by visions and sounds of my body being manipulated, altered, invaded by hands I didn't know? Katsaros knew he was up against a will stronger than his. He wanted me to consider the surgery as possibly life-saving. I should be keenly on guard for any

further worsening of the headaches, or suicidal thoughts. He told me they would be a cue that this had become an emergency situation. I imagine that if I revealed what I had seen from inside the laundromat, he would have never let me leave his office. My head hurt very badly even as I was sitting there speaking to him, but I refused to let on.

The pain made me lose focus a little on my way out of the building. I was on the third floor, which was split into three separate wings, and I wound up in Radiology and then in a series of hallways that got more and more confusing. In one of them there was a glass wall, and a sign on the door said this was anaesthesiology: Dr. Micah Small. Katsaros had mentioned him. He'd told me this would be the man who would anaesthetize me; he had invited me to go speak to him to soothe my nerves. I stopped there for a moment, looking in. The reception area was dark and the office seemed to be closed, but when I pulled on the door it was open. I went in. There was a light on in the hallway that led deeper into the office, so I went that way. I walked past a couple of closed doors. This Dr. Small had framed a few things on the hallway walls: awards, and two pages from an article in some health industry magazine which featured a photograph of him holding some medical device. I took a right into the first open room I found. It looked a little like a regular examination room but it was a lot bigger, lit harshly from above. A clock ticked on the far wall. Strange containers were ranked along high shelves, and tall cabinets lined the walls. In the middle of it there was only a gurney. It was like the one I had seen blown past by the wind when I was alone in the laundromat, but then, weren't they all alike? There was an object sitting on this one. I found myself afraid to get closer to it, even though it seemed to be nothing more than an ordinary jar. I took two steps forward, just two and no more. It was all I could bring myself to do. The jar was filled halfway with sand. I knew I had seen it before. It was back in Porter's basement. Sitting on his giant tableau representing that village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. He'd used real sand to represent parts of the dry terrain, and there had been a closed jar of the stuff sitting nearby. I remembered that vividly, and as soon as that memory came, I froze, staring at that jar, trying to understand why I was so afraid of it. I turned and left, walked through the office, and found my way out of the building, needing a drink badly.

The week of October 15 began my transition from mere insomnia into an active attempt to keep myself from falling asleep to keep the nightmares away. It involved a lot of walking and a lot of pills. It was scary how intensely my body wanted me to sleep, though. Like something was within me, reaching up from a place in my spine no one had ever seen, reaching up into my throat and to a spot behind my eyes and pulling me down toward it. No matter the position of my body, no matter the location, eventually I simply passed out. Loud movies and loud music and pacing my freezing apartment were all just weak shields against that thing that knew how to make me sleep. I was afraid that there would come a time when I would be so tight in its grip that Dr. Micah Small would come to my home, sense I was in bed with no way of waking, and decide it was time to enter and come and take me to surgery. And I would come awake just when Katsaros's scalpel was inside my brain. It felt inevitable. I needed no more signs that I was born to play out that script, to wake under anaesthesia and be invaded by every sight, sound, and smell that had slowly killed my uncle. So every time I fell asleep was another chance for Small and Katsaros to inadvertently condemn me to death. I didn't blame them. I blamed fate.

On the 27th I was in the grip of the worst headache yet when I realized my necessary next step. If I absolutely had to sleep, at least I could try to end the constant nightmares. It was one in the

morning and I was wide awake. The temperature outside had dipped into the high twenties. I bundled up and went out. From memory I found my way in the car back to Strawkeller. Even in a state of exhaustion so advanced that I kept seeing nonsensical words on the highway signs, I got every turn correct. I bounced up and down sometimes in the car seat to get my blood moving and keep my eyes open. After two hours I pulled the car into the little park I'd been to many weeks before and killed the engine and the lights. As soon as I was engulfed in darkness I felt that hand reaching up inside my spine, reaching up to take me down, so I took another pill, something the guy I bought it from called Lagoon, and got out of the car and into the sharp cold right away. I had an axe in the trunk, a big one I'd used sometimes when camping in the woods. I took it with me and began to walk toward Grocer's Pond. The moon above was brilliant and shone my way. With the axe in my hands, and the wind in my face, I had a renewed energy. But halfway to my destination, fear made it go away. I hummed to myself, talked to myself. The leaves cracked under my feet and my ears and face stung in a way I craved. I would not cower, my nerves would not fail.

Those trees were still there, amongst all the normal ones, the ones with no tops. Those three in a kind of semi-circle, there as if waiting for me. If I hesitated, I would be overcome with fright, so I acted. I moved closer to the tree closest to me than I had ever dared in the nightmares. Being that close made me feel dizzy and panicked and my heart felt as if it would burst from my chest, but I closed my eyes and swung the axe as hard as I could. My hands thrummed as the head sunk into the wood.

It took seven, eight, nine desperate hacks to strike blood, which appeared black. At first it only leaked out, viscous and repellent, but when I connected with the axe so deep into the wound I'd created that it nearly caused the tree to topple over, the blood sprayed out in a freezing coil, striking me in the face. Instead of terrifying me it actually caused me to become stronger, my feet planted on the ground. I felt I was growing. The tree toppled over, and I had won. Then I swung the axe at the second tree. My strikes were so profound that the blood began to spray from this one immediately. I would say that it took me twenty minutes to finish the job, but I may be very wrong. I seem to remember having to walk to the edge of the pond and splash water all over my face to get the blood out of my eyes, and then stumbling around lost for a long time, trying to regain my bearings before making it back to the trees. The important thing is that I did what I went there to do. The three of them lay harmlessly on the ground and I left the woods. I lost consciousness at the truck stop on the turnpike and didn't wake up for almost twelve hours, but my sleep was peaceful and wonderful.

I agreed to the brain surgery on November 3rd for the sole purpose of meeting Doctor Micah Small. Now his office was fully lit, and in front was a pleasant receptionist. There were the usual forms and the questionnaire one filled out to make sure the correct type and amount of anaesthesia would be given. Then, sitting down with the doctor. He was a pale, quiet man. I asked him how many cases of anaesthesia awareness he had encountered. He said he never had. Only read about them in case studies. An obvious lie. He guaranteed me it wouldn't happen to me, explained at great length how the process supposedly worked. He wanted to arrange for me to talk to Dr. Katsaros that very day because I did not seem very well at all. I lied myself and claimed there had been no headaches recently, but I was not fool enough to try to deny I was operating on only on the minimal sleep needed to live. I never told him just how little there had been. Maybe he suspected based on my appearance and the way I slurred my speech. Yes, I'll go see the doctor, I told him, and left him. But when I stepped into the outer office, it was dark, like it had been that one day, before. The receptionist was gone. When I turned around, the light in the hallway had gone out.

I decided to go forward, toward the corridor I'd been to before, but further this time. There was much to learn here, I knew, if I found the right hidden corners. When I went into the room where I'd seen the empty gurney, and that curious jar of sand, things had changed. Now it opened up on the outside world. Not on 16th Street, but on open country. A faint drizzle fell on a wide patch of sterile, scarred farmland nestled among the mountains. The sky over them was half white, half black with thunderclouds. The foliage in the far distance rustled secretly. Directly in front of me was a faded, beaten footpath leading to a collection of small huts of wicker and stone. I stepped through the doorway and into the clearing, following the path. Despite the drizzle it was hot and humid. I heard the low buzzing of flies nearby, and that was all. I reached out and touched the lowest part of the roof of the first hut on my left.

Turning to the left just beyond it, I saw a man sitting on a handmade stone bench, watching me. He was about my age, dressed inappropriately for the surroundings, in khaki pants and a white collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Before him, on the ground, was a soldier, lying face down. The grunt's hands were a ghastly white, as if he'd been dead for some time. His combat helmet was half on, half off his head. I asked the man on the bench who he was and he told me his name was Grant Grayson, but he said that didn't matter. He had information for me. I had been wrong in trying not to sleep. That wasn't how I was going to save myself. I needed to do more to avoid the fate of waking up under the anaesthetic. I told Grant Grayson I'd do anything. He said I had to take their *power* away from them, the *power* of these men who wanted to put me under. Take away their power, and I'd be safe. Yes, that made perfect sense to me. And if I failed? I asked. Grayson laughed, a cruel, mocking laugh. Well, then, I would belong to the Middoth. I didn't know that word; could he show me what that meant?

Grayson rose off the bench. *Come with me*, he said. *What do you think it is that reaches up into your throat to pull you down to the place where the doctors can get you? I'll show you the Middoth.* He took hold of my arm near my elbow and walked me toward one of the huts. But now I didn't want to go. I didn't want to see this awful thing. Yet he didn't let me go. When I tried to get away from him, he smiled and gripped me harder. Now I remembered that Grayson was the name of the man who had been killed and sent down the Roundtop River to the falls, and over them. I started to scream, but it seemed like we were alone in the village, utterly alone. The door of the hut he was taking me to was ajar. He pushed me in and followed right behind.

Someone was inside, waiting for me. A person dressed in a blue surgical gown and mask. I still recognized him instantly from photographs. Uncle Andrew, I croaked, but he did not answer, just looked at me silently. Then, almost like we were on a game show, he unfurled his hand like a showman to display something on a gurney beside him. A jar half-filled with sand. As I looked at it, the sand inside began to shift, just a little. Some of it was displaced, and that space was quickly filled in, and another spot was then disturbed from within.

The Middoth was in there. This is where they kept it. It was trying to emerge. And if it did, and broke through the top of the jar, it would have me, wrap me in terrible sleep, and so I put my hands to my temple and released my loudest scream yet, and that was what finally released me from the village and certain death.

If you enter my little house on Jessup Road today, November 10th, which is the day I was supposed to report for my surgery, you'll find it's different from the way it used to be. The living room still seems the same, and the kitchen, but if you turn on the light beside the basement stairs and go down, down, all the way down, that's when you notice what's new. I have a table

ready for a man of average height, and I've bought enough ether online to anaesthetize two of them easily. The surgical implements were not hard to buy, since they're nothing too advanced or unwieldy. First I will try Dr. Micah Small, I think, and maybe Katsaros later. Their awful power over the sleeping will vanish, I see now, the moment they themselves wake during surgery, completely controlled by someone who is no longer afraid of them, and never again they be able to threaten me or anyone else. Their power will be mine instead. But in addition to putting the patient under, there must then be a *procedure*, otherwise it's pointless, no? That's the part I'm not sure of yet; how far in to cut, and for what purpose, and how much I can ... *rearrange* without going too far. Just something else to think about tonight when I get into the van and head into town. I'm very tired but sleep is something I will not reward myself with until the surgery is done.

landmark

My name is Blake Verbanic. I grew up in a small town called Gullis, Michigan. Like a lot of small towns, it had its dark urban legend that drifted through the consciousness of the people growing up and living there. Ours centered around a place we all just called 'the cannery.' When this story begins it was an abandoned, burned-out hulk down near the docks, fenced off behind a gate at the foot of some unused railroad tracks. In its heyday back in the 1960s it had employed 400 people or so, but from old photos you can tell it was always ugly and awkward, unkempt, poorly maintained. The company that owned the cannery had never been much of a success. In 1987, when I was a junior at Gullis High School about four miles away, the cannery, already on its last financial legs and employing only about 120 people or so, came to a nasty end. In trying to stave off their debts somehow, the owners had taken to basically renting out two floors of the place to a chemical plant, which used that space to store huge drums of stuff they shouldn't have, including a flammable acid used in cleaning airplane engines. During a heat wave the drums weren't cooled properly and somehow two of them simply exploded. A fire started and swept through the fourth floor. A worker named Menko Dubacz had been blinded by the acid released in the explosion and he suffered severe lung damage from the chemical smoke that ensued as he stumbled around, screaming, trying to find a way to safety. The cannery was shut down immediately and it never reopened, falling into the kind of decrepitude that made it look more like a massive haunted house than an industrial building. Awfully, Menko Dubacz was found dead on the third floor of the cannery eleven months after it was closed. Homeless, he'd been for a short time living inside the cannery for some reason. He never lived to see what would surely have been a whopping wrongful injury payout. He'd only had an IQ of 85 they said, and no one had known anything about him except that he'd been quiet and didn't speak English so well. And then in the summer of '88 he simply died at the age of 50, of natural causes the papers said, but people tended to believe that the lung damage and despair over his blindness hastened his poverty and death. So maybe you couldn't call the Menko Dubacz story an urban legend because it was real, it had really happened. They buried Dubacz in a pauper's grave and the cannery sat behind its vast rectangular fence near the docks day

after day, season after season, rotting and neglected, an empty hulk no one noticed unless you were strange enough to go walking down there, where there was so little human activity.

One night during my winter break from college in 1990, I and some friends were hunkered down in Gullis's main dive bar around midnight, watching the snow fall through the windows. My girlfriend at the time was across the room; she'd gotten to talking to a backpacker passing through town. When the guy was in the bathroom she told me he was a really nice college dropout who was tramping on foot all over the east and was actually looking for a sofa to sleep on for the night, and she hinted that my folks wouldn't mind terribly if he crashed there, would they? They actually wouldn't, and I myself was trying to be a bit of a hippie back then, so I decided to talk to him for a while, make sure he wasn't a psycho, and at one in the morning I did give him a lift back to my parents' place. His name was Chris. He was scruffy and unshaven, but otherwise very cool, a former anthropology student who couldn't make up his mind about what he wanted out of life. On the drive to the house, he was pretty effusive with his thanks for the sofa offer. Not because of the cold so much, although that was a part of it of course. He'd had a very bad scare the night before, trying to slum it with his sleeping arrangements. He'd tried to sleep in some old building at the edge of town, he said, and it turned out he meant the cannery. I was fascinated and wanted to hear the story. As he told it, us starting to really creep along slowly because the snow was getting a tad dangerous to maneuver through, he lost all his previous good humor, it just vanished more with every detail.

He'd been exhausted when he wandered near the cannery, and freezing, and he vowed that he would get inside somehow or die trying, because he just couldn't take the elements anymore and, not knowing what the place was, he had a gnawing urge to find out. That's a misguided sense of youthful adventure for you. So he'd found a section of fencing that was more drastically tilting over than most and fought his way up and over, wrenching his foot painfully upon landing on the other side. From there he circled the building until he spotted a window that looked partially open. He built himself a kind of stepladder from old debris over the course of 20 minutes, and sure enough the window was open and he got in.

Chris couldn't describe the layout of the place much, since he only had three matches and used them sparingly. He just wanted to find a spot where he could stretch out his sleeping bag and lay down for a few hours' sleep. It seemed like every step he took in the dark, he kicked some piece of detritus. He thought he could hear rats both above and below him. He made his way up to the second floor, which was warmer but cavernous and echoing, and he remembered seeing the silhouettes of tall machines he didn't understand. He had to use one of his matches to avoid stumbling over a bunch of beams strewn around. On one of those beams he saw lettering covered in a thin sheen of dust. He couldn't quite say how the lettering had been made, except that it was handwriting and may have just been thick magic marker. He remembered that the letters sometimes curved too hard and broke at the edge of the beam, as if they'd been written in the dark and the author had simply missed sometimes. The letters said: IT'S TIME TO WORK BUT I HAVE NO EYES.

Chris curled up in a corner and tried to sleep, but he was already scared. The place was just so big and dark. It was almost two hours before he blanked out, and then when he came awake again and checked his watch, he'd only been out for an hour and a half and it was a ways to go till morning. He decided he couldn't make it through the night in there, though. He rose, rolled his sleeping bag back up, and lit his final match to find his way out again. Upon lighting that match, he saw something on the cement floor about five feet from where he'd lain. More writing. It was that same sentence: IT'S TIME TO WORK BUT I HAVE NO EYES. Except Chris swore that

the writing hadn't been there when he'd laid down. An area of dust had been brushed away so that the letters could be written, he said; you could see the difference between that spot and what lay around it.

Chris had half-walked, half-run toward the stairwell, felt his way down it, then navigated through the shadows to the window he'd come in through. He didn't dare look back. He remembered starting to make little clicking noises in his throat due to sheer terror, and he'd actually cried out upon making his way back down his improvised step ladder, needing to vocally let out his fear. He'd had a lot of trouble getting back over the fence. When he finally did, he limped back toward town and paid for a motel room, something he swore he'd never do and couldn't really afford to. He'd slept till two the next afternoon.

After that story, I made Chris and myself a giant two a.m. meal of pancakes, eggs and bacon and I told him the history of the cannery, and when I talked about Menko Dubacz his stare became stony and distant, and though he kept trying to smile it kept failing him. He was a very nice guy and I was glad I could give him a sofa and a big meal. He headed north the next morning.

I thought about the cannery very differently after that, naturally. During summers home from school I drove by the property sometimes, looking at the building's dead bulk against the night sky, glancing at all those windows. I told a few people the story, trusted friends. It seemed that nobody knew anyone who had been inside since the closure, or even heard stories of kids going in on a lark.

I graduated in 1992 and moved into an apartment in the middle of town. I worked in my father's law office and prepared to apply to graduate school. Apparently the corporation that owned the cannery had long refused to sell it or bulldoze it, believing the property, so close to the waterfront, would be worth a great deal of money if they waited for an economic resurgence to come to Gullis. But the fairly hard times in town remained. Finally, though, the local newspaper reported the property had in fact been sold in principle to a land developer, and demolition would take place within the year.

Two days before Thanksgiving, I drove over to my older sister's house to watch her six-year-old daughter for the night while she and her husband went out for their anniversary dinner. They lived on High Street, pretty close to the docks. I played a game with Paula and we watched three episodes of her favorite cartoon show. My sister called at about nine to check in. She said I might have to perform what she called 'a little safety check' before I put Paula to bed because for the last few nights, she had been getting scared over something she claimed to see outside. My sister was sure it was nothing but overactive imagination. As Paula brushed her teeth I asked her about it. She assured me she wasn't scared but she thought someone was living at what she called 'the canoe museum'. The 'canoe museum' she said, and then she led me to her bedroom window and pointed out. We were only eight blocks from the cannery, quite elevated, and could see down on it, beyond the edge of the neighborhood. For the last three nights she'd seen a man standing just inside the outer fence where it jutted out near the old railroad tracks. There were still two functional streetlights down there and a little splash of rusty light fell across that spot where no traffic ever went by anymore. What was he doing out there? I asked Paula, and she said, Nothing. But she didn't think he belonged there. And then she bounced off toward the kitchen to get an unauthorized handful of grapes. As I tucked her in I assured her that I'd make sure no one was down there tonight. She said OK and I turned off the light.

I would have sat up in the living room watching the cannery but Paula's bedroom had the only good vantage point, so I sat and tried to watch TV instead, looking at the clock. I was trying to remember if I'd ever told my sister the story of Chris the drifter and his night in the cannery, and I was convinced I never had.

As she almost always did, Paula came out into the living room about an hour after bedtime, asking if she could have a drink of water. I went and got it and when I returned she had already gone back into her bedroom. She was standing near her window in the dark. She said, Look, there he is, and my blood ran cold as I set the water down on the sill and looked anxiously out.

But I didn't see anything down near the fence that surrounded the cannery. Even if I had, that area was so murky and far away that anything down there could have been anything else, impossible to prove as human. No no, Paula said, you're looking in the wrong place, and she pointed higher, at the cannery itself. And there I saw it. In a high west window, one obscured by years of filth, the figure of a man. There was some sort of dim light on in the room he stood in, the first light I had seen in the building, I swear, since its closure. Almost as soon as I saw it, that light went out and with it, that unmistakable silhouette. I couldn't even speak for a moment; it was Paula who said, *I'm scared of that man*. I guided her away from the window and told her it was okay, that I knew him. That was the security guard who worked there and made sure no kids came in and hurt themselves on the old machines. It was dangerous in there. This she at least seemed to half-believe. She sipped some water and went compliantly back to bed. To avoid worrying her I made a point of not looking through the window again, not once.

I went into the kitchen, drew the sliding door shut, and got on the phone. I called the police, telling them I had spotted someone inside the old cannery on Shepherd Street, and if it was a slow night, maybe they could send a patrol car past and take a quick look. They thanked me and I sat again in the living room, praying that my sister and her husband would get home soon so that maybe I could go down toward Shepherd Street.

They did. Barely ten minutes after I made the call they came in, making as little noise as possible so as not to wake Paula. I didn't tell them anything then; I wanted to be quick so I simply said everything was fine and wished them goodnight.

Hiking my way down High Street, I kept an eye on what I could see of the cannery, but my view was quickly obstructed by houses. It was a twenty-minute walk before I found myself at the train tracks. A left turn took me around the corner from a defunct liquor store and the outer fence was just ahead of me. If I listened real close I'd be able to hear waves lapping against the piers well beyond the property. As always, the building revealed nothing of itself but darkness.

I saw a police car parked on the curb near its east side. I stood, waiting, scanning the windows high above for the slightest flicker of light. I saw the patrolwoman walking from around the side of the cannery. She pushed on the east gate and then turned and locked it back up. I jogged toward her. She was very pleasant. She told me they had calls like mine every once in a great while but they'd never actually found anyone on the premises. They had keys on permanent loan from the absentee landlord. Tonight the cop had entered on the first floor and gone up just one more and shone a flashlight around and called out and listened. I had foolishly left out the detail when I'd called that the man I'd seen had been on the fourth or fifth floor, but I didn't press her. She said she wouldn't be terribly surprised if some homeless man had found his way in, but not until there was a real problem would they seriously get involved. She was just glad

the place was going to be demolished soon enough. Her kids, she said, were way too interested in the place. She had taken a few photos when she was inside which made her think someone had in fact been there very recently. She showed me the Polaroids as I leaned in, seeing casual shots of isolated spots inside the cannery as lit by her flash. I was confused at first, because none of them showed any sort of object or evidence of human presence. It was just the predictable rotting interior of an abandoned building. Then she got to the last picture and let me hold it to see it more clearly. Yes, the writing on that wall did in fact seem quite recent. Inked, somewhat messy letters six inches high read I HAVE TO LEAVE, BUT I HAVE NO EYES.

The mid-nineties came and went, but still no sign of the cannery coming down. Something about a legal squabble over ownership, property issues no one seemed to really understand. I upset my father by opting for medical school over law school and I left Gullis for Connecticut, and for a long time I was only back in town once a year or so. The cannery became a dark running joke in town in my absence, an eyesore that had been around so long it had superceded the beautiful town common as its best-known feature. I chose to set up my first practice back in Gullis so I could care for my ailing father. The turn of the 21st century found me a general practitioner living in the nicest part of town, far out of sight of the cannery. Over the years I'd kept my ear to the ground about stories related to it. No one had any. I'd only told a few out-of-towners my pair of chilling anecdotes about it. My wife would have been very disturbed by it. My father would have scoffed.

I drove by the place a lot after my office day ended, once a week maybe, going well out of my way. Still no graffiti, after all these years, which I found odd. The fencing had been strengthened in several places and the locks on the two gates bolstered. Aside from that, the only instantly visible difference in the place between 1992 and 2002 was a few more broken windows. I knew enough about the law to know that occasional safety inspections would have to be conducted, but I also knew enough about the world to know that occasionally those things get conveniently overlooked or paid off for the sake of preventing code violations from being found—or even vermin infestations.

I forget exactly what year it was when I was at a Christmas party and talk turned to the cannery and if it would ever go away. One of the party guests, I think her name was Maris, said we had to wrap up the conversation before her husband came over. For years he had refused to go anywhere near it. He'd developed a very serious, not-to-be-joked-about phobia about the place ever since he'd had a weird experience with it. Maris's husband had been at Spears Point looking across the bay through binoculars as the sun was going down and seen what looked like a man on the roof of the cannery, stark against the backdrop of the darkening sky. It looked like the man was in great distress, staggering wildly about, slapping at his eyes as if he were being attacked by unseen insects or something. Maris's husband had looked away, finding it disturbing. For some reason he didn't want to speak about, from that moment on he tensed up terribly if he got too close to the place, and wouldn't even stay in the same room if the cannery came up in conversation.

I am now forty-five years old, still living in Gullis, father of two kids. I never left. My wife finds a charm here I never did. The county tried to sue the legal owners of the cannery some time ago to force them to sell or demolish it, but they failed miserably. It's comical, really. Some time

back I had a week all to myself while my wife took the kids to Arizona, and I spent an hour every single night watching the cannery from Spears Point. Useless. The place was dead as ever, and it seemed like it would remain so till the day I died.

Five weeks ago began the end of the story. I was in the High Street Diner and I saw a man sitting alone at the counter who I thought I recognized. It came to me after a while. It was Chris, Chris from all those years ago, the backpacker who had camped out on my sofa. He had gotten a lot heavier, but it was definitely him. Those pale blue eyes, questioning eyes, were a giveaway. When we made uncertain eye contact it was him who walked over to me and gave me the I-bet-you-don't-remember-me speech. He smiled and said I had the exact same hairstyle as I did back then. In 1997 he'd actually entered the priesthood and worked everywhere from St. Louis to a remote Catholic mission in Peru. Just a year ago he'd amazingly settled in Gullis, where he was working for the state school system, no longer part of the clergy. It hadn't worked out for him, he said mildly. He went back to the counter after a few minutes of catching up.

On my way out upon paying my check, I couldn't resist sitting on the stool beside him and asking him if he remembered his encounter in the cannery. He looked at me much more soberly then, and nodded. Very much, he said, very much. He did not say this with amused reminiscence. It was like I'd reminded him a cousin had died. I told him of my minor obsession with the place. He expressed a keen interest in hearing my stories, and we wound up discussing the cannery for more than an hour. He still had a faint bit of that youthful candor that led him to speak of things that were on his mind, that trait that I think had made people want to offer him their sofa for a night twenty-five years ago. It turned out that upon returning to Gullis for his job the May before, he'd made a point to walk past the cannery several times, at night. He honestly believed that whatever was there, was still there. It was a feeling in his bones. He had seen things, experienced things, during his first assignments for the priesthood outside of the country, that had kept his mind open to such thoughts. It took me a bit of pressing to get that anecdote out of him. We were almost the only ones left in the diner by then.

In Peru he'd helped to establish a tiny parish in a village west of Iquitos. He could not name one person there who did not at least occasionally attend his services, except for one, a man of about sixty named Arquedas. From what Chris knew of him, he was an intensely reclusive man who never spoke unless spoken to. A parishioner told Chris one day that of course he had become this way, because he hadn't truly 'been' Arquedas for more than twenty-five years. The man had accidentally run over and killed his own brother while drunk one night, and some time afterward, it was said, the brother, Ciro, had slowly and cruelly taken him over—entered Arquedas's body and mind, and had been there ever since. The man's complete personality transformation had made it obvious. Before the accident he'd been a gregarious drinker and storyteller, a bit of a womanizer even, and about a year after it, he'd slowly fallen silent, removed himself from all village affairs, then virtually vanished into his tiny house for good. When Chris asked what the man did, he was told that he simply 'walked the Sumac road.' For hours each day he shuffled up and down a half mile stretch of packed dirt and stone that had been cut off from the village by flooding years ago. He wore the same suit all the time, the same hat. Some of the locals brought food to him, and he somehow still collected money from a decade-old work injury. Chris had become curious enough about the villagers' general agreement in their belief in Arquedas's possession that he had gone out to the Sumac road one gray day to see if he was there. The road, now totally useless and abandoned, was choked off by trees and received little light. Sure enough, Chris had seen the man, dressed in a tattered gray suit, walking with great slowness toward the road's western endpoint in the woods, hat held in both hands. Chris thought this was the oldest man he had ever seen, far, far older than

the villager's chronology described. When Arguedas got to the end, he turned with some effort and began to walk back in the other direction. He appeared to see Chris but offered nothing in response to Chris's friendly nod.

Chris left well enough alone and assumed the so-called possession was a tragic case of survivor guilt and depression. One day someone came to Chris and said it was thought that Arguedas may have died, since he hadn't come out to get food or walk toward the Sumac road for several days. No one seemed to want to go to his little house and see for themselves. So Chris went alone. When he got no answer to his knock, he entered the two-room house. He was struck immediately by the odd and intense smell of burned leaves. Arguedas was in the bedroom adjoining the living room, lying under the covers. What Chris noticed even before he approached the bed was that the house seemed to have not a single trace of any personal mementoes, no books, no papers, nothing on the walls, no possessions at all. Chris remembered one weird thought going immediately through his head: *A ghost needs no human amenities*. Then he drew back the blanket. Arguedas was in fact dead, unclothed, seeming very small. But in death, he was almost unrecognizable as the heavily wrinkled man the villagers knew by sight. Chris leaned close in and found himself looking at a man of perhaps sixty or so, not a decrepit ancient. His hair was mostly black, not entirely gray, and his eyes were no longer so sunken. When the authorities came to take Arguedas away, there was some question of his identity, but two women in the village were finally convinced to come forward and confirm that yes, he'd had no children or living relatives, so it must have been him. Death by natural causes was the verdict. The villagers prayed for his soul. Some seemed to have expected the transformation that they believed took place at the moment when the spirit of Arguedas's brother, sensing death was imminent and no longer able to observe the world and function so crudely through the body he'd overtaken and stripped of life for two decades, essentially devouring his sibling, returned to the grave. I hope the dead aren't really as mobile as that, I said to Chris a little uneasily.

Chris and I shook hands and we assured each other that we'd let each other know if we became aware of any developments involving the cannery. The way we exchanged email addresses made it a sure thing we really would. And then, just four days later, he contacted me. All he sent me was a link to a blog called 'Night Dares', written by an adventurous art student who lived outside of Pontiac and made it his hobby to explore supposedly haunted places—always illegally, he boasted. The cannery had come across his radar due to nothing more than a friend of his unearthing the story of Menko Dubacz. He had no evidence of mysterious doings, but now he was vowing to make the cannery one of his next spelunking journeys. Late that night I sat at my computer for a half hour, summoning up the nerve to reply to Chris with a single sentence, which was this: *Do you think we need to go in there now?*

So it was that the man his parishioners had once called Father Stankind and I drove to Shepherd Street on April 27 of 2015, parked, got out and walked toward the bay side of the cannery. It was not quite four in the morning. We'd have to do it then, we'd decided, because it was simply our best chance to not be spotted. I'd told my wife I was going fishing. We had what we thought was a clever story cooked up in case of arrest, involving sounds of someone in distress heard inside the building.

We weren't as agile as we once were, that was for sure, but the outer fence had still never been improved to the point where it could keep anyone out if they really wanted in. I boosted Chris

up at a spot where there was very little good sightline from the houses on Decarthur Road, and with great effort he made it over. Landing on the other side was the biggest worry. It was kind of a fall, and he made it awkwardly. At first I thought he'd seriously hurt himself, but he was just very shaken up. I remembered how he told me on that night back in 1990 how he'd wrenched his foot. I felt my own collision with the cracked pavement with every bone in my body, but we'd made it. We jogged around the corner of the building and completely out of sight, the piers beyond the property visible now. I saw a boat way out there on the water, nothing to worry about.

We regrouped and craned our necks up at the windows above us; there was just no way any of the doors were penetrable. We could smell the mold from outside, cloying. A lot of the broken windows had been done over with plastic sheeting at some point, an easy enough fix from outside, and we decided the closest one to where we were would be the target. A lot of the old debris around the place had in fact been taken away, so a makeshift pile to climb would have been a tough feat. But we'd come with a collapsible ladder, which I'd passed very carefully over the fence to Chris. My buck knife took apart the plastic sheeting on the window quickly and we climbed into the cannery.

If anyone ever asks me if I'm scared of the dark, I'll tell them sure, a little, but I find one thing somehow eerier: Directing a flashlight beam into the darkness, making what is seen spectral somehow and what is not seen more sinister. Our point of entry turned out to be an office of some kind; a desk was still in there, and two filing cabinets. I drew one of the rusty drawers open and put the buck knife in there and closed it again. I didn't want it on me in case we were caught. It was hot in there and I was sweating already. That odor of mold was so strong I was suddenly glad I'd had nothing to eat for ten hours.

We went into the outer hallway and through a door into a corner stairwell—the exact one Chris had once entered. We had agreed beforehand to start on the fourth floor, where the fire had struck in 1987. We almost couldn't breathe in that stairwell, it was so fetid and humid. Chris kept his flashlight beam at foot level as he ascended and I kept mine much higher. We saw no footsteps in the dust but ours. There was still a sign on the wall, faded and rusty, advising workers that there was to be no sitting on these stairs.

We exited the stairwell into another hallway, went past what looked like a locker room, and emerged into a huge mostly open area half-filled with huge metal racks bolted to three of the walls, and storage pens made of wood and wire. A lot of them had obviously been dismantled, or perhaps destroyed in the fire. We weren't looking for anything in particular. We explored individually, in silence. Finally Chris came over and whispered something to me as I was looking at some old boards and metal rods, and what I thought was the motionless tail of a rat peeking out from under them. He said, Come here, you can see where the explosion scarred the wall. And I think he was right. A dark discoloration spread over a thirty foot patch on the east wall, and it was deeply pockmarked there throughout. I looked around, wondered where Menko Dubacz might have been standing when the explosion had happened.

I had begun to walk back toward the stairwell when Chris tapped me from behind and motioned to stop for a moment. He said, Let's just listen. But I found it difficult to concentrate on what might be hiding within that silence, because I was seeing Chris's face in the gloom, just barely visible with his flashlight held so low at his side, like seeing someone through the dark static of a TV station that's not coming in well, and his expression told me he was sensing something in the air that I couldn't. He was attuned somehow to this place, and I was not. I was just an

outsider feeling the usual terror of the dark and the unknown, but Chris was really here, reliving his hours back in 1990. And we went there, two floors below, to the spot where he remembered sleeping. As we moved through the gloom he whispered to me what he thought we'd see as we went, as if he were trying to prove to me it had all happened just the way he'd described it: the machinery, so much of it covered in vast shrouds of tarpaulin; a snaking assembly line that spanned almost the entire floor, its belts frozen in time; great flat worktables with broken pieces of metal lying all over them. The two spots where he'd seen the sentence he believed Menko Dubacz had left for him no longer held any messages. Chris seemed both relieved and disturbed by this.

We descended into the basement. There were exactly forty steps in the stairwell that led down to it, as opposed to twenty separating each of the other floors. It got noticeably cooler when we went below ground.

I pushed on the door that led into the cavernous open area. A small draft curled around us. We saw bins twice as tall as we were filled with god knows what, each bearing a list of stenciled serial numbers. Gigantic load-bearing posts marched off into the distance at twenty foot intervals. The amount of rust on them made me wonder if the entire place might just collapse someday. Chris spotted something near the basement's midpoint and trained the flashlight there. What we saw was strange enough to investigate. As we got closer, it got strange enough to forget almost everything we'd already seen.

There was an area where everything had been cleared and swept, and it had been done fairly recently; you could tell by the interruption in the dust. In that area, something had been constructed. Into gaps in the cement floor, which had been cracked and weakened by decades of water damage and then forced open to reveal the dirt beneath, had been driven three tall wooden posts, taller than we were, lined up in a row, the center one a little taller than the others. These crooked posts were bisected toward their tops with short, horizontal boards that had been nailed in place. We were looking at giant crosses. The center one had been draped in a ripped wool blanket which fell away with one tug. There was coarse animal hair all over it. Chris moved his flashlight very close to the crosses, going over every inch of them. They had no visible markings. The wood appeared very crudely hewn, not my machine. Carried in here somehow; how else could they have appeared here? And at the base of the one in the middle, sitting there half on cement, half on old earth, was something that had way too much color for these surroundings. It was a bucket, a small bright pink plastic bucket with a bright yellow plastic handle, a child's beach toy bought in a store, and recently enough so that it still shone like new. I crouched and looked into it. A small object was inside. I remember thinking it was a crab at first, a grayish brown corpse, and I winced. But it was a hand, a human hand. Withered with age, shrunken, yet still somehow identifiable as a man's. Neither of us would touch it.

We decided to go deeper into the basement, but only got a few steps when the beams of our flashlights fell across a tan-colored stone four feet across and four feet wide. Nothing that should have ever been found inside this building. A black and white photograph had been firmly taped to it. Words on the stone had been lettered quite carefully on the flattest part of its surface. MENKO DUBACZ, they said. DIED JULY 1987, SET FREE FEBRUARY 10, 2015 BY PAULA KIRK. February 10, 2015: That date was two and a half months ago. The photograph was a printout of one I had seen of Menko Dubacz online; it had apparently been taken when he was in the army at age eighteen. He stared at us with sad, blank eyes.

Who is Paula Kirk? Chris wondered aloud, and I said: *That's my niece's name.* Little Paula, who I used to babysit, had grown up stormily, in great conflict with her alcoholic father and very religious mother, and had been in and out of trouble since the age of thirteen, always for simply disappearing for days at a time and mysteriously refusing to tell anyone where she'd been. She'd left home for Europe the day she was legally able, and my sister had only heard from her twice since then, rarely knowing her exact whereabouts, only becoming more and more distressed over her daughter's increasingly strange appearance as seen on a Facebook page on which she never posted anything but occasional photos and messages, in German, about moving from one place to the next. Who had helped her with this act laid out before us? Where had she come from, and where had she gone?

Chris and I stuck close together as we explored the rest of the basement, but we found nothing. We returned to the display we'd found and read that inscription again and again, but never again did we look into that bucket. Eventually we left the basement, went up to the first floor again, and found our way out of the cannery. It was almost dawn. We felt we had to move very quickly at the end. The sight of headlights far off froze us once, but we remained unseen. We got into my car and I drove away mostly in silence; I suppose we were both individually going over everything again in our minds. Before Chris got out of the car at his apartment house, he told me he'd send me an email soon, and went inside to sleep.

But the email which eventually came three days later didn't say much. Chris said he had to think about what we saw some more. And then a week after that, he was gone. His last message to me said only that he'd decided to resume the research he'd failed to commit to all his life, and would now follow it where it needed to go, which meant leaving Gullis, whose towering sinister landmark had truly been what drew him back. That was a confession I fully expected. There was nothing more for him here now. My questions about whether what he had to do involved leaving the country, or research into people like my niece, went unanswered. Meanwhile, I've not told my sister about what we found. Why should I?

I expect one day Chris will write me from someplace in the world I've never been to, telling me about things I think I don't want to know about. I keep waiting to see a headline in the local paper about something strange found by police, or maybe by a blogging trespasser, in the basement of the old cannery. Someone will find the crosses, the stone, and that pink and yellow bucket. Someone has to someday. The only question is who will tell the story, and how. I don't think, though, that there's anything in the cannery to be afraid of anymore, technically. Yesterday I was talking to a realtor about moving to a bigger house, in Beall Landing, ten miles down Obelisk Pike. I asked her if we could look at some places right on the river, on the south end of it, near an old historic church. She said absolutely, if I and my wife and kids had strong nerves. That was where people kept seeing a ghost recently, late at night. The one they'd taken to calling the Stumbling Man.

fields

My name is Gordon Ivis. On August 9th of 2015 I emerged on foot from the woods onto a long unmarked dirt road just east of the Blaine Fountain town line in northern Carolinus County. A little wobbly, I walked down the road toward a cutout in the trees where I had parked my car and got in, dropping my backpack and tent pack into the passenger's seat. A wave of faintness washed over me, and when it passed I tried in vain for several minutes to recite the names of the first five presidents. I didn't even come close. I drove away from that lonely area and as soon as I could get a cell signal, I got out my phone and called a colleague of mine and left a message for him to meet me at a Days Inn off Route 21 in three hours, at 10 a.m. I checked into the motel and then showered and shaved, looking hard at my exhausted, pale face in the mirror. After that I collapsed on top of the bed, falling asleep instantly. The alarm woke me just 45 minutes later. Kurt Kapremian, a sociology fellow at Francis Drake University, met me outside in the parking lot, and we immediately began to drive twenty miles into the middle of rural Carolinus County—directly back where I had come from earlier that morning, toward a stretch of barren woods and plains that nobody ever noticed. We saw little but farms and forest as we went, passing fewer and fewer cars. Eventually we turned off onto that unmarked dirt road that stretched north and south, a connector to Greentown Road and routes out of the area, and parked in the same secluded spot I'd initially found three days before. We got out and headed into the woods.

I explained everything to Kurt as we hiked. No one had legally owned the tract of land we were headed toward until the year 1901. It had been bought by a turf farm and held for thirty years; they went out of business before they could expand enough to use it. Eventually it defaulted to the state, which never did anything with it. Starfleet Cellular bought it twenty years ago and they technically still owned it, but they had such financial problems that the chances of ever being able to build their towers out this far seemed more slim by the day.

Less than a mile into the woods we came out into a vast dead stretch of flatland marked by small slopes, bushes, weeds, snarls of ivy, scarred patches one hundred yards across where no grass grew anymore, nothingness. It rolled out beyond the horizon, more than 1200 acres in total, most of it lying to the west of where Kurt and I stood. That spot was where I had slept the two nights before. I explained to Kurt that two nights were all I'd been able to take. I had begun to feel too strange. My dreams were hideous. I had found myself walking in circles and not realizing it.

I'd found in my admittedly spotty research since June that domestic abuse incidents were 200 percent higher in the closest surrounding rural neighborhoods than those just beyond them, moving from a concentric circle. Car wrecks were twenty percent more frequent despite one tenth of the traffic. I had started looking at the tract after a newspaper report about a college student who had camped out here while methodically bumming his way to New York. He had walked into a police station afterward and collapsed. He had no memories of being here, and so his friends had to piece together how long he'd been camping in these dead fields. Shortly he dropped out of school, with no explanation to anyone, and he was later killed in Afghanistan. I got curious. That had led me to finding another thing. And eventually I became convinced: There was something seriously wrong here. As in Hengist Castle in Tyndrum, Scotland, where Kurt

and I had spent three strange nights two years before, I believed there was a truly damaging and unpredictable energy all around us. But this one felt more predatory. I let Kurt wander for a bit, getting a feel for the air here, the silence. As usual when we came to a new place of interest to our work, he uttered not a word as he stood, gazing into the distance, staring at the ground, nothing spoken from the time we first parted the woods. Before too long I suggested we leave. I was already feeling just a little light-headed.

Over coffee at a diner in Temperanceville, Kurt had me explain in much more detail the dreams I'd had in the tract. It almost felt a little foolish to speak of them. Stop signs, that is what I had dreamed of. Lots of stop signs, in the middle of a big field, surrounding me. In the dreams I would close my eyes and when I opened them again those signs would have moved a tiny bit closer. Cold, angular and sharp. I was waiting for them to behead me somehow. I knew it was coming but felt powerless to keep it from happening.

Kurt inquired about that second thing that had made me more curious about the place, the incident I'd told him I was going to explain, but I was momentarily confused. I was sure I'd already told him the story of the homeless woman, told it to him back as we stood outdoors in the tract, but he assured me that I hadn't mentioned it. And I realized it was true. So I was still not quite right in the head. I would have to take a couple of days away from my classes, clearly. Even my body still felt wrong, my limbs heavier somehow, my joints creaky. I told Kurt that seven years ago, a homeless woman had slept on the north end of the tract for eight consecutive nights. On her way out, she had walked to the house that was closest geographically to the tract, and had tried to trap a family inside it and burn them alive. For no apparent reason; she had no connection to the family whatsoever, and no criminal history. Kurt had actually noticed that house off Greentown Road as we'd driven, sitting alone surrounded by trees. They'd had to completely rebuild it; only the original chimney remained. The current owner, a Mr. Litko, a retired rail engineer, had shown me the exterior scarring it still bore from the flames. He himself knew very little of the tract; never went there, never reported hearing distant shots as if someone had decided to do a little illegal deer hunting on it. It was to him a foreign land.

I outlined my plan for Kurt. I would camp again in the tract, only this time I would set up a video feed and he and I would be in constant communication so he could monitor me from his home and his office. But Kurt, always cautious, always methodical in our years of working together off and on, needed more to go on. He wasn't seeing enough evidence yet of a place worth serious study. I had been working for the past two months on contacting and perhaps visiting that homeless woman in the state facility where she now lived, but I would likely need a couple more. Crafting a convincing story to be able to speak to her was a tricky business. So Kurt and I agreed to put my plan off until that meeting could be made to happen.

On a gray, rainy day in mid-September, I drove forty miles north to the dumpy strip mall town of Adair. I had an eleven o'clock appointment at St. Martin's Hospital. The place had the feel of more of an assisted living home than a care center for the mentally ill. The doctor I had dealt with was named Pratt; he wasn't more than thirty. He very politely went over some reminders of the conditions of my visit, which we'd covered on the phone already. Asking Ms. Devere any questions about her possible guilt or innocence in the matter seven years before was out of bounds, but everything else was fine. We walked the length of the hospital and then out a rear

door leading to a covered outdoor walkway just barely protecting us from the rain on either side of us. It led us into something called the Close Supervision Wing. Ms. Devere still lived in this part of the building, Pratt, told me, though she hadn't had any real IOCs—Incidents of Concern—for about two years. He saw no problem in leaving us alone to our talk while he attended to some other business.

She was sitting in a rec room when I came in, dressed in blue sweatpants and a sweatshirt with the Sierra Club logo on it. She stood up immediately to greet me and offered me a warm smile and a handshake, telling me to call her Bella. She thanked me for coming. She was not only lucid, polite, and aware, but downright professional somehow, as if she were an interviewee for a faculty position at the college where I worked. Bella was in her mid-fifties and relatively trim, her hair carefully combed.

I had falsely convinced her and Dr. Pratt that I was writing a book about the homeless. She seemed interested in my publishing history and we chatted for a bit about some of her favorite books—she had a fondness for reading big sprawling historical novels. Sitting there talking about James Michener and Leon Uris, I almost questioned whether I really was, in fact, talking to a woman who had tried to burn a family alive inside their home, sending a man and wife to intensive care with cases of smoke inhalation so severe that their respiration would never be the same. My attempts to reach them had been firmly rebuked.

I asked Bella how she had come to be homeless. She said it had been nothing terribly unique. She'd become addicted to painkillers, lost her sister to cancer, and made a few very bad decisions in desperation to keep her head above water. One thing had led to another. I zeroed in quickly, a little too quickly probably, on her time in the tract. She recalled it only vaguely. She remembered spending some time at the end near that house, the one off Greentown Road with the pretty chimney, but she couldn't really say what she did there, or why. She had been quite mentally ill by that time, she believed, and had been for about two years. As for the question of whether it had all seemed to get worse for her out there, in the middle of nowhere, whether she felt lonelier, or stranger, she didn't think that was it. She'd just been trying to pull herself together before deciding where to go next after being dropped off by someone who had offered to drive her all the way to Virginia but had suddenly changed his mind. She recalled it being very bleak in the tract, and she had very little to eat. As she spoke she maintained her smile, idly brushed a piece of lint off her sweatshirt. If anyone she reminded me of my Aunt Amy, a mathematics teacher.

I told Bella I'd been thinking of spending a little time out there, where she had camped, to sort of see and feel what she must have seen and felt. There was an odd pause, and she told me, pleasantly, that she didn't think I wanted to do that. I let her go on. Certainly, she said, nothing that happened out there made her try to kill that family. Which is probably what you're most curious about, right? she asked. Again, I said nothing. The impulse to do that terrible thing, she explained, had come from some awful place inside her that was no longer there. She said, *Don't go*, spacing out the words to an unusual degree. I told her I understood, and I was about to try some other topic with her, something to take us out of the moment for a bit, when she said again, a little more directly: Don't go there. She was still perfectly pleasant. But that was the third time she'd warned me in the space of a minute, as if her mind had gotten stuck in a record groove. She held her gaze on me longer than I was comfortable with, and I looked at the floor. She asked me then if I could get her a soda from the machine out in the hallway. It was a perfect time for me to regroup a little, then come back with a new line of questioning if I could even think of one. I rose and went through the open door.

The soda machine was about thirty feet away, near a bathroom. There were two other people in the hallway who I perceived to be patients: a woman sitting on a sofa beneath a TV set with the volume turned off, looking somewhat sleepy-eyed; the other, a much older man, was standing near a bookcase and flipping through the pages of a magazine with a rapidity suggesting some sort of disorder or compulsion. Dr. Pratt was much further down the hall, chatting with a colleague. As I walked I could see that the soda machine dispensed only bottled water, for no charge. I was putting my change back into my pocket when I heard something from behind me. Quick muffled footsteps, and then a voice, Bella's voice, rising, rising. Just before I began to turn I saw Pratt looking up in my direction with alarm. In my peripheral vision I then saw Bella approaching me fast, saying only the word *No*, again and again, louder and louder: *No, no, no, no, no, NO!* She was carrying something in both hands, swinging it at the back of my head: the folding chair she had been sitting in, and I was unable to fully ward off the blow when she hit me, a sharp, eerily precise strike to the neck with full force as her mouth formed a gaping O, her eyes wild, intent on murder. I lost consciousness even before the others in the hallway brought her down, and I stayed out until I was taken into an ambulance and away from there.

On October 17, the video feed connecting me in my home near Catskill University to Kurt Kapremian in the woods of Carolinus County chirped into unsteady life on our respective laptop computers. Kurt had pitched camp only one hundred yards from my own original point of entry into the tract, between two small hills that were only a brief hike to one of two shallow, lifeless swamps I'd come across. The day was unseasonably cold. The slight pixelation of the image sucked most of the color from the wild grasses and choked ground all around Kurt. It had taken longer than we planned to get the feed working and I was due for my next physical therapy session in an hour, so upon that first contact, we didn't talk much. The good news was that Kurt's battery situation had been improved drastically by an I.T. guy at Francis Drake, and it was self-evident that his portable WiFi station was working to perfection, though getting a signal on his cell was still pretty much impossible. The bad news was that I had been told by my doctor that day that no more pain medication was forthcoming, and so I probably wouldn't be able to make the short hike out to see Kurt or resupply him if the situation ever called for it. I'd be moving very carefully for another couple of weeks.

Even as I told Kurt this, though, I could see two tents in the camera frame behind his left shoulder. He'd gone ahead and brought his sister along: Jill, a chemistry lecturer at Steppridge. He saw no reason there shouldn't be two of them out there, and since she was quite familiar with the nature of the unusual work Kurt and I undertook from time to time, he saw no danger. After all, she'd been in the army, as he was very fond of telling me, and if brawn were ever called for, she was the better bet. He had related to her the entire story, everything he and I knew up to that moment. I wasn't pleased that he had brought her someplace so potentially unpredictable, but there was nothing I could do, and it did make sense. At the moment she was off gathering firewood in case they felt isolated and unseen enough that night to use it. For the last six miles of their journey out into the tract, they'd seen no one at all on lonely Greentown Road, and had discovered an even more secluded option for leaving their car. Kurt's plan that night was simply to do some reading; it was already getting toward dusk. We would dial back in with each other at 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. the next day. We said goodnight and I closed out of the video application. After physical therapy, feeling on edge and cut off, I finally transcribed the handwritten notes I'd taken out in the tract two months before, just to re-experience things a

little. There was an episode out there I'd already forgotten about. I'd become unaccountably sleepy out near the edge of the south swamp and fallen asleep in a patch of reeds until almost dark. Upon waking there had been a couple of seconds, just a couple, when I didn't seem to be able to move my arms and legs, as if I were being held down. In my notes I had put this down to a brief episode of sleep paralysis, but that had been on the first day of my three out there, and by the time I'd left, the sleep paralysis explanation seemed delusional somehow.

The next day at noon, Kurt transmitted some video he'd taken for me. Over the course of three hours he had been able to cover pretty much the entire walkable area of the tract, but nothing he sent back was any real surprise to me. In his long montage of shots of the little hills and copses of trees, the depressions and the thatches of foliage that seemed to grow so randomly, I tried to detect any sort of pattern or unusual detail that I might have missed the first time. As when I had camped there, what surprised me most was the utter lack of litter, even in the woods. There was not a stray soda bottle, cigarette butt, or plastic bag anywhere in the tract. The one time Kurt's sister Jill became visible in the video, with Kurt tracking her briefly with the camera, she commented on this.

There was exactly one sign of human presence, however ancient. None of the seven people I'd spoken to who had a passing knowledge of the tract had been able to explain it fully. Toward the top of the tract's biggest hill was a vast, settled heap of rotted, weather-eroded wood probably more than a century old, having been naturally broken down to almost nothing. The remains of a barn, most likely, or maybe a pair of them, almost like the remnants of a past civilization. The longest piece of intact wood was perhaps four feet long. It all spread out over a stretch of almost forty yards. Little by little over the decades, wind and rain had sucked the wood of all color and texture while beating and crushing and burying it so that the entire mass reached a height of maybe ten inches off the ground. Grass and vines wrapped most of it in a snarled death grip to the point where the majority of the pieces couldn't even be lifted to see the ground beneath it. I had pried a few of them up when I was out there, but it had been a difficult and somewhat repulsive task. Termites seemed to have been agonizingly slow in finishing it all off. In the video, Kurt seemed to stare at those fallen remnants for an unusually long time, thinking, considering. But he made no comment.

That night, after my physical therapy trainer left, I ventured out of my house for the first time in eight days, stir crazy from the confinement my injury had forced upon me. As usual, it was hard going just pulling myself out of my wheelchair onto my feet. I hobbled over to the door and took my time walking like a very old man out to my car, frustrated at my continued shakiness. I collapsed onto the driver's seat, wincing in pain. On the other end of my trip, my destination being the Fox Chase Café nine miles away, I foolishly left my laptop's power cable in the car, and the thought of dragging myself back to it from the cafe's front door was depressing enough to make me consider totally forgoing the work I had in mind. But I forced myself to get it.

I'd been in the café for about an hour when my cellphone rang. It was Jamie, my graduate assistant. I had told her back in August that I was working on notes for a book about rural Carolinus County, and more specifically, the unpopulated area east of Blaine Fountain. Another white lie. The day before, she'd managed to find a text of interest, in the Special Collections wing at Steppridge, a book listed in the database only as *The Diary of a Resident of Carolinus County, 1848-1849*. An authentic diary, not a reproduction. Jamie offered to take a look through it for me but since I was still on medical leave from Catskill, I told her I'd go to Steppridge myself the

next day. I'd have to read the diary there, as Special Collections material was deemed to be too valuable or fragile to check out—in this case, the latter condition, I was sure.

In the morning, the video feed to the tract came to life right at 9 a.m. as Kurt and I had agreed. Kurt and his sister Jill, who turned 41 that day, were sitting in folding chairs beside each other. They had a little news for me: something they'd captured on video that was of unusual interest, and after a few false tech starts, Kurt was able to replay a six-minute segment he'd spent the morning editing together. At about eleven the previous evening, right around the time I'd left the Fox Chase Café, Kurt and Jill had retired to their respective tents for the night after jotting down some notes from the day, just tedious details on how they were feeling, and thoughts they'd experienced, as I had requested. As usual, they left the camera going and aimed in a wide shot at the area where they'd camped, so both of their tents were in view, but just barely visible with the night vision setting engaged. A couple of hours later, when they were both asleep, a few birds landed very close to Jill's tent, and then five or six settled on the top of the tent itself. Once there, they didn't really move. At one point I counted eleven birds either on top of her tent or within three feet of it, and those were just the ones I could spot in the dark frame.

There was a jump cut, and Kurt estimated that the next patch of video showed a time period perhaps forty minutes later. Some of the birds had flown off while others still remained, not feeding, just inert, or turning their heads this way and that. And then a much larger dark shape came down from the night sky and appeared near Jill's tent. It was most likely a vulture, twice as big as any of the other birds. It settled, and then after about thirty seconds, it literally walked directly into Jill's tent through the open flap, disappearing. She had remained asleep and oblivious. The video cut once again, and now the first light of dawn could be seen in the far distance. All the other birds gone now, the enormous vulture was seen to finally emerge from the tent, and in short order it flew out of frame. Jill, upon waking, found no evidence it had ever been there. At no point had any of the birds gone toward Kurt's tent, not even for a moment, and when Kurt had scanned through the entire video, neither he nor Jill saw the vulture leave it, not until dawn. A head-scratcher, sure, but we didn't see what we could learn from the episode. Kurt and Jill still felt perfectly fine. They engaged in a bit of humor about what had happened, though Jill assured us she would be securing her tent that night. I asked Kurt if this reminded him at all of the incident at the supposedly cursed Hengist Castle, when a conversation we'd been having was interrupted by a large bang that came from the front entrance. We'd opened the door to find a severely injured ram. Our video man had seen what happened from an upper floor: The ram had broken into a gallop from a field one hundred yards away and charged the door suicidally for no apparent reason. Kurt pointed out, rightfully, the many dissimilarities between that episode and this one. Outside of the episode with the birds, I could tell he and Jill were becoming increasingly bored, which was to be expected. We had decided to cap their stay at four nights if nothing unusual transpired.

The Special Collections library at Steppridge University, open only four hours per day, is in a suitably archaic basement below the campus's performing arts center. The assistant there took me through an aisle of metal racks and pulled down for me a transparent plastic box marked only by a number and a colored dot. My Catskill ID got me a cubicle for the afternoon and I settled down with what Steppridge had catalogued as *The Diary of a Resident of Carolinus County, 1848-1849*. The thing was in pretty bad shape; every page I turned threatened to detach from the binding. The man who had owned this diary had written his name on the first page: *Orrin Loveland*. He had only occasionally remembered to date his entries, which were

voluminous. I settled in, happy to read the thing from cover to cover, but not really expecting anything to jump out specifically about the area of the tract, and approaching it more as a potentially interesting glimpse into local history.

From the first fifty entries or so, I was able to piece together through the man's dense and difficult handwriting that he had once been a tobacconist, but by the time he'd moved to nearby Loringore from parts unknown, that business had foundered. He had a wife and two children. He liked to write his thoughts about books he had read, and the lesson plans he was making for his children, whom he was apparently home-schooling. The rest of the diary was filled with notes about improvements to the tiny house he'd built himself, his experiments with cooking, his dreams at night, stories he wrote for his kids. His occasional descriptions of his walks and hunts, and the fact that his only interactions were with his family, seemingly by design, suggested a strangely lonely existence for all of them. About thirty pages in, there was a reference to something called Cattle Road. This rang a bell. In normal circumstances I would have walked to the main library across the quad to research maps of Carolinus County, but the pain in my neck and back and shoulders was quite bad that day and it was too great a trek. So I called Jamie, and was lucky enough to catch her in a three-hour gap between classes. In only forty-five minutes she confirmed for me via text that Cattle Road had in 1920 been renamed Greentown Road—which meandered toward the unmarked one that I, and later Kurt and Jill, had parked on to enter to tract. Settling in again with the diary, I became hopeful that this man had lived somewhere very close to the tract and might actually reveal a little of its story. But I got more than that. Things became truly interesting with the entry of November 9, 1849, after which the diary became a very different sort of document.

The author of the diary, Orrin Loveland, had been sitting at the kitchen table of the cabin he'd built, kneading dough in the middle of the afternoon, when he heard his wife's worried voice out in the main room. Their teenaged son, Terry, had entered from outside, carrying his little sister, June, in his arms. She'd had a bit of a shock while they were out racing thorn dolls down a nearby creek and needed some consoling. Terry reported that they'd seen a man standing far away in the trees near something Loveland referred to only as the 'big hill.' The man's face had either been severely deformed, or he'd been wearing a mask. Neither Terry nor June was sure which was the case. Terry wasn't even sure the stranger had any arms. He'd never seen a face like that before, one that seemed to have been 'put together wrong.' The man had just been standing there, not moving, and June had seen him and begun to scream and run, having to be chased, making Terry lose sight of the man for good.

Loveland wrote then of the conversation he had later that night with his wife, Darcy, before bed. She had not been nervous about living in such isolation until that very day. It had been a full month since any of them had even seen a single other human being. Darcy asked her husband just how long the four of them were obliged to live in such a manner. There followed a murky reference to something that may have happened in town the year before, something that Loveland needed people to forget before he and his family returned.

The very next day after the little girl June had received her scare, Loveland took his children back to the creek, giving them lessons as they walked. There was an amusing passage in which Loveland described June's difficulty with keeping straight the combatants of the Revolutionary War; she kept referring to them both as 'The Englands.' She was also having a little trouble with the concept of Indians and apparently wanted to buy one someday. It was during this passage, which I read only fifteen minutes before I'd have to surrender the diary back to the archives overnight, that a reference to a specific feature of the geography made my pulse race a little. In

teaching Terry that day a few of the subtleties of orienteering, and trying to playfully trick him a little, Loveland happened to describe their exact position as they walked back home from the creek. From this I made a wild guess that what he called the creek was in fact a dry bed that wandered for a few hundred yards on the north end of the tract, bottoming out in the tiny swamp I myself had fallen asleep beside, and which Kurt had just captured on video. I placed the diary carefully back inside the transparent plastic box and assured the librarian I'd be back when Special Collections opened again the next day.

I was late getting back home and it was almost twilight by the time I hooked back into Kurt's video feed. He was staring off into the distance when the feed kicked in, looking pale and tired. Much stranger was the fact that he was wearing something on his head—it was a rudimentary crown of leaves, made by hand, stitched together out of boredom, I supposed. He didn't have a lot to report that evening. When I asked him where Jill was, he seemed vaguely confused. He wasn't absolutely sure; she had been gone for about an hour. She went for walks a lot, he said, assuring me that she was fine. I asked him about his odd headwear. He chuckled a little. He wasn't sure what had gotten into him. He then began to explain for me, unasked, the origin of the laurel crown. Apollo, he said, fell in love with Daphne but she was so horrified that she fled and asked the river god to turn her into a laurel tree. Apollo declared the tree sacred and broke off a branch to wear in her memory. So the laurel crown was really a symbol of empty victories. Olympians rarely knew that, Kurt said pensively. That didn't explain for me why he was wearing one, and he truly did not have an explanation. He said again it was just something that had occurred to him. This was followed by another uncertain half-laugh, and a resumption of his watch of the horizon.

I told Kurt I thought he should find Jill and get out of the tract. Now. He seemed surprised. I told him flat out that his responses were making less and less sense, and that he should not have been this tired. The place was changing him in the same way it had changed me, I could have sworn it. I didn't know why, or how; it was simply the truth, and for now, that was all we really needed to know. Kurt did not disagree entirely, but he told me that one thing he wanted to take care of first was to check out a hole they'd come across that day, a rather big one, sort of near the south swamp, covered by layers of branches, one big enough to fit a man into. Frustratingly, neither Kurt nor Jill had taken any video of it for me. He apologized for his lack of judgment; he'd been fighting off something bronchial. But suddenly I didn't care about the hole, or much else besides their safety, and urged him again to find Jill, pack up the car, and come back to Lamont, where after a couple of days of a more normal life we could get together and analyze the experience. I asked him to get back on the feed in one hour, and then, as an afterthought, I told him to just leave it running if he could. He had enough battery power for that, but he told me the feed would likely stutter and then drop if left on that long. I wanted to try it anyway. I didn't want to lose that tiny video window onto the tract when Kurt left the frame; I thought maybe I could pick up on some obscure atmospheric alteration if I kept watching uninterrupted. He told me he'd discuss my idea with Jill and agreed to the one-hour time frame, exactly one hour. He moved off camera. I was left watching a more or less static image of the small patch of field that contained their tents. A slight breeze wandered through the line of trees in the background. It grew darker, and I waited for anything to enter the frame to break the monotony: a bird, a squirrel, a swirl of leaves, but nothing came.

An hour and twenty minutes later, the objects in the frame were almost indistinguishable with the onset of night. The sky was muddy and bruised with ugly grays and reds. There was no sign of Kurt. The tract remained exactly as before.

Two nights after his daughter saw a man with a scary face in the woods somewhere in Carolinus County, Orrin Loveland was awakened from a troubled sleep by his wife, Darcy. The date was November 11, 1849, according to the heading above the diary entry. She had seen a man outside their bedroom window, she swore it—a man who appeared to be wearing a mask, even though it was almost pitch dark outside and such a detail would have been difficult to make out. It had to have been a mask, she said, it *had* to; *no* human head was shaped that way. The man had not been peering into the cabin; he had been moving past the window very slowly on a strangely even pace, almost as if he had been balanced and pulled on some unseen cart. Or maybe floating, Darcy said when she found the courage to joke. Loveland wrote that he spent twenty minutes circling around their remote cabin, looking in all directions for any sign of life. There were no footprints outside their window, a fact he wasn't able to fully confirm until the next morning. The children, he wrote, thankfully did not wake. Darcy refused to even try to describe the face she had seen beyond referring to the eyes as being in the wrong places. As she very gradually fell back to sleep over the next couple of hours she admitted that the darkness may have caused her to see aspects of that face that may not have been really there. But the motion of someone outside the window had certainly been real, she insisted. It was almost dawn before she drifted off entirely.

The next day, Loveland had gone off alone while his wife and children were busy building a new chicken coop. He was forthright with the reason for his exploration, and intended to assure his family that they were still very much alone. In the diary Loveland wrote that he wished he had purchased a dog when they'd moved out here. This is the actual passage he wrote about what happened that day, from the photocopied pages of the diary which I made unauthorized:

'I walked out toward Cattle Road and spent the better part of two hours making a wide circle. The closest to town I allowed myself to wander was the easternmost patch of Thaddeus Moore's onion field. I was certain his men never had cause to labor that remotely after the summertime, but I was still as circumspect as I could be. Funny, how the aversion to being seen has made me cautious to the absurd, as if one sighting of my face would suddenly give Moore or anyone else knowledge of my troubles and cause them to summon the police.

'I stood for many minutes in the woods near the south ravine, listening to the sounds of encroaching wintertime, and as I did so, it began to snow once again. Curse the snow; I am not yet educated enough in it to know how to fasten us against it, but we will adapt.

'At some point last night it must have already snowed atop the hill. There was a half inch already there. I looked for footprints, without result. Then I went beyond the eastern ridge toward the stables, for if there were some poor homeless wretch living out this way, would he not inhabit the only shelter for miles? The damned stables, such kindling for June's imagination, such an invitation to injury.

'I had never before approached the stables on foot, only horseback, and doing so now gave me pause. If someone wished to do me harm, there could be no more convenient time or place. I found myself hesitant to call out to anyone who might be inside as I entered. As I had once been told by Vaughn Jenkins, the stables were abandoned and decrepit. The path through them was straightforward, but all was very dark in there. The daylight peeked and poked through holes in the overhead boards; at night there would be no navigating the place. The stables had each been marked by hand long ago with a number for the convenience of Carl McConnell's

workmen. Even some of them are likely dead by now. Such thoughts I have sometimes! I cut through all the way to the intersection at the west end of the stables, and at the T-corner I went to the left for no particular reason, and around a final dead corner, and there I saw in the cold ground a kind of hole the width of a cart's wheel, one it must have taken considerable effort to dig. As I stood there a gentle hand of air came in through the place and pushed a tiny bit of old straw to the edge of the hole, where it seemed to hesitate like a suicide reconsidering his options, before it disappeared over the edge. An image that has stayed with me, but why, I cannot say.

'I had no wish to see into that hole, for it held no fascination for me beyond the problem of making sure June never comes near this place. I retreated and doubled back the way I came. And now it is time to write of fear, for I can say now that I have felt it in a state as pure as can be known without facing rifle or bayonet. As I emerged out into the white daylight once again, I stopped at the sight of a changed situation. Before me on the very light blanket of snow, in the exact spot at which I had entered the enclosure, had been placed a very familiar object, unmistakable because of Terry's initials etched on the side. At the cabin it had been nothing more than the stump where I sometimes split wood and regretfully dispatch our chickens. Sitting here now unexplained, carried and placed by unfamiliar hands, it could only be a warning from someone who must have followed me. I scanned the landscape rapidly but saw no one and nothing out of the ordinary, and more impossibly, no footprints in the snow other than mine. Because my presence was obviously considered so vile, I did not so much as turn to peer back into the shadows of the stables. I moved very quickly toward my home. Not until I was at the bottom of the berry hill did I turn to regard the place I had just explored, and I saw no one in pursuit. I began to run for fear that Darcy and the children might be vulnerable. I fell twice before the house came into view, and came to be so drastically winded that a stitch in my side crippled me. I tried to call out to Darcy but no sound came from my throat. When I was finally able to make my way down to the house I found everyone safe inside and unaware of anything wrong. I chose to keep them so. The stump's absence will not be noticed until perhaps the day after tomorrow if I keep everyone inside, and so to provide myself time to think, I will involve Darcy in the day's lessons and afterward make it an afternoon and evening of games, which the children should enjoy very much. I fear I must take Terry with me back up the hill. This may happen tomorrow night. The remainder of this evening has been calm. Darcy has had no questions for me, which I find odd.'

From the library at Steppridge, I hobbled back to my computer at home at five o'clock. By then, I had finished reading the entire diary, and would have no need to return to the Special Collections room. I had spent the car ride back home trying to break the full story down in my mind for Kurt, and trying to talk myself into telling him nothing until he returned so that he wouldn't want to stay out there alone with Jill. I very much wanted for us to regroup and return to the tract together, but that couldn't happen until I fully regained my health. It seemed too dangerous now for us to remain separated like this.

The feed was up and running when I clicked into it, but for ten minutes there was no sign of Kurt. I hadn't noticed that I had an email from him. He'd replied to my own urgent emails about why he'd gone missing without explanation by merely clicking 'Reply' and inserting a link to a video clip. I expected the video would consist of his investigation of the odd hole he'd mentioned. I played it in a smaller window so I could keep an eye on the live feed.

To my surprise, Jill's face filled the frame instead of Kurt's. She greeted me pleasantly enough on the video and cut right to the point, which was that she had been musing upon what had happened with the homeless woman Bella Devere back in 2008; she'd of course gotten all the details from Kurt. The more she had thought about it, Jill said in a wandering monologue, the more sympathy she had for Bella. It seemed to Jill that there may have simply been a primal, instinctual protective impulse that had been awakened in her as she camped and became entranced by the extraordinary beauty of her surroundings. That was how Jill phrased it: 'extraordinary beauty,' a curious moment of hyperbole. Perhaps, Jill explained, that instinct had taken her free will away, just as it had most likely been taken away very suddenly once again when I had spoken to her in the hospital of wanting to visit the tract. If Bella had in fact seen herself as the tract's rightful guardian, would it not have made perfect sense to strike at whatever force seemed to threaten it, whether it was a man and wife living quietly on the tract's edge or a researcher encroaching upon it? Jill spoke very logically and thoughtfully on the computer screen. Is it not the most essential human right, she said, to destroy the forces that attack the things we are obliged to protect? Who had truly committed that crime off Greentown Road—Bella or the man and wife who surely must have known that they were, in essence, thoughtlessly trespassing on the tract? It was at this point in the video that I had to pause it to take a moment and process this bizarre line of reasoning before I let Jill speak on. During that pause I composed a text to Kurt, asking where he was, but then quickly remembered that he wouldn't be able to receive it with no cell reception. I sent it anyway. It was too important not to try and tell him that based on what I had read at Steppridge, they might be in danger. When the video resumed, Jill quickly moved off the original topic and informed me simply that she and Kurt were having a terrible time with the speakers in his laptop and while it was no problem to try to keep the video feed up through the remainder of their stay, any sort of live interaction would be too difficult.

Literally within seconds of the video ending, I saw both Kurt and Jill appear live in the frame that showed, in real time, the area of the tract where their tents were. Kurt had moved the camera back about twenty or thirty feet, getting a wider angle of the area. The tents, I saw to my relief, had been broken down as if they had been preparing for departure, hopefully before nightfall, which would be in about thirty minutes. I spoke into my microphone, trying to get their attention, but they didn't hear me. I became incredibly frustrated.

I watched as the two of them started to go about the process of building a small fire, something I don't think they'd done before during their stay. That was confusing; there would be no reason for a fire if they were leaving. Once they had brought a few handfuls of sticks and branches to a central spot in the clearing, Kurt knelt and tossed a couple of lit matches into the pile and Jill fanned the tiny flames for a few minutes until the fire was going rather impressively. They stood there looking into it wordlessly for a while, and I tried to summon them both again with my voice through the mike. No reaction. And then, inexplicably, Kurt took the cellphone he held in his right hand, and he dropped it into the fire. I leaned forward in my office, not believing my eyes. Seconds later, Jill took her own cellphone from her pocket and did the same. They stood beside the fire, now watching the flames swallow up what had been offered. They didn't exchange a word, and never once did they look back into the camera, though they must have both known I was watching them, because it was a full forty minutes now past our regularly scheduled meetup time. Eventually Kurt stepped forward to the fire and methodically began to snuff out its edges by kicking dirt onto them. The video feed dropped just about then. That was all right, because I already knew it was time to forget thinking about contacting Kurt anymore and start to think about calling the police.

I stupidly talked myself out of it until almost midnight. I spent some of the interim going back through the original video Kurt had shot on his first full day in the tract, when he'd taken the camera all around the area. At the 14-minute mark, among his shots of the fallen stables, he had randomly dug out a seemingly insignificant clot of wood amongst all the others. Maybe eight inches high, twelve inches wide, worn down from a larger piece that had once been semi-circular. There were what appeared to be initials etched into it, barely discernible now: *T.A.L.*

On the night of November 13, 1849, Orrin Loveland and his son Terry hiked together toward the stables where Orrin had been the day before. They started out at about eleven o'clock, two hours after Loveland's wife and daughter had gone to bed. Orrin and Terry made sure they left the cabin very quietly, but they had a story prepared in case their departure was noticed. It was a bitterly cold night, Loveland wrote. It took them a little less than half an hour to reach the slope which ascended slowly toward the area where the stables were. Loveland and his son carried no weapons; Loveland had, for reasons never explained in the diary, sworn he would never go near another gun. He had been extremely frank with the boy about what he had felt and seen, and Terry, surprisingly mature and strong for sixteen, had taken it calmly. This is from Loveland's diary entry of that night:

'The sky was an ugly purple color over the land. I did not care for the way our footsteps crunched in the snow so noisily. I kept my hands inside my coat to keep the cold from biting them so severely. We lost several minutes when we became somehow displaced in the trees beside the east ravine. Neither one of us could sort out how that had happened, but at some point Terry had tugged on my coat and said, 'Papa, we missed the meadow turn.' I would have laughed if it hadn't been so odd. Since our arrival here from Loringore I've become so forgetful.

'Seeing the dark hulk of the stables, something tugged strangely inside me and I was overcome by a vision of no seeming meaning. I thought of Darcy waking and lighting a candle and going to the bedroom window, but in my vision her concern for our well-being lasted only as long as it took to take in her own reflection. In my mind I saw her touch her face, worried that it was changing somehow. Neither her eyes nor her mouth seemed familiar to her, and it was this that she wanted so badly to tell me, but I was gone. That was the entirety of my vision, and it could be put to no account, and it left me as soon as it had taken me. Terry and I went forward. It surprises me that I allowed our mission to be so ill-defined. Whether I even intended to enter the stables, I do not know, unless I were called into them.

'Standing about twenty feet before the pathway in, I was content to wait and absorb a feel for the quiet, thinking that I might detect a presence, or that a presence would emerge to explain itself. Our chopping stump was still there. A minute passed, Terry as patient as ever. Then I heard his voice behind me, strangled and quiet, and I turned, and saw what he saw. I know if I write this part down it can only serve to frighten me again decades from now when and if I take this journal down from the shelf to remind myself of older days, but I write it still. Standing on the ridge well behind us were four distinct figures. I thank God that the darkness of the night kept them from being fully seen. I can say that the head of each man, if men they were, was grossly larger and more curiously shaped than should have occurred through normal birth, and I cannot swear that they were possessed of any arms between them, and as if they were merely fenceposts built by workmen, they stood rooted by not pairs of legs but rather one very thick leg each. In this way they appeared from a distance to be uniform in nature, four of the same atrocious design. Terry and I stayed utterly quiet. If I were asked why I should believe these

presences were even living things, I would not be able to prove it empirically, but only speak of a feeling that they were watching us, and not needing to come any closer to do so. Terry finally asked me what we were to do. I whispered that we should merely retreat quickly, head for the opposite slope. I thought I perceived the large head of one of those silhouettes slowly turning and I believed that I had miscounted the presences, for there were now five of them on the ridge, not four. I stepped forward and grabbed Terry by the shoulder and forcibly turned him to me so he could see though the dark the urgency in my gaze. And we began to move. Walking with such a hurried gait was hard going with trying not to fall in the snow, but we were away from the stables in less than a minute and not looking back. At some point we found ourselves actually running for the woods. Visibility there was very poor. We stumbled through them, angling our path toward the east as much as we were able to judge. It was my hope to come across the skinny stream and from there change direction. We stopped when we'd exhausted ourselves and caught our breath while looking back, always back. If someone were following us, we could not tell at all. The moonlight was an insufficient sextant.

'I know that Terry did not begin to feel safe again until we did in fact come across the stream and he spotted the old ash tree, a familiar sight. Our path described an exaggerated loop back home. When Terry spoke, it was to ask me, 'What do we do, Papa?' but I had no good answer for him, only that neither his mother nor June needed to know what we had seen. I forbade him to speak of it while assuring him that we would no longer live out here so far from Loringore. He was greatly relieved. I cannot say which one of us stopped being truly afraid first, but I can report that I was never courageous in looking back over my shoulder at the land that lay just behind us, not for one moment, until the house came into view again nearly three quarters of an hour after we left the stables, by my estimation. This will be the last time I leave the house after dark.

'By providence, Darcy and June were still asleep. I myself did not get a single wink of it, keeping one eye on the windowpane, and keenly attuned to any sound from outside. Some hours later, before dawn, I turned groggily and beheld the dim sight of Darcy now lying awake beside me, staring at the ceiling. I confessed that Terry and I had been out, and that there were persons nearby who were likely to make our life here difficult, and we would prepare to leave that very day. To my disquiet, Darcy asked for not a single detail of what Terry and I had seen. She merely accepted my statement at face value and urged me not to act hastily, for she was not at all afraid and had much to do before we departed for Loringore. And now it is morning and she is still coolly rational about what needs to be done, and has again left it to me to decide our course, for as she put it, 'Leaving would be a shame; it will be so pretty in spring, unlike any place we have ever dreamed of; let's not make plans that put too much toil on you. We have no quarrel with anyone, after all.' I find her mood very curious.'

That was the last journal entry Orrin Loveland ever made. But there was one more passage left in that tattered volume, entered in completely different handwriting, and undated, so there was no indication as to just when that other person made it. Here is what it says, verbatim:

'So kind. So kind. They have come to me three nights in a row, though they cannot speak or move in the way we care to define it. They have been so clear. They want only to stay, and come out sometimes to eat the sunlight. Their claim to everything that lies around us is greater than ours, surely, having been written long before the earth itself was ever dreamed. And so I will protect them. I can be strong. Orrin is confused all the time now, and irrational, but they have made it known to me why this is. They have great difficulty in communicating with the male of the species. Their thoughts become sharp and frightening in the expression of them, and men

have been driven mad instead of doing what must be done. But I understand the singers easily, as if I were born for the purpose. I feel myself becoming stronger each day and angry at even the notion that any harm would come to the ones I must protect. Tonight they will sing to me again, and I will listen.'

End of the journal. At Steppridge I had read that last entry again and again, and then, as I'd put the journal back into its plastic container, my mind spinning, I took notice again of the small round green sticker on the box with a typewritten code on it, F94. With an idea and a vague hope brewing in my mind, I had asked the librarian what the significance was of the colored dots on the boxes on the Special Collections shelves. Green in particular. She told me that green meant there were related items in the clippings archive. She led me into another room filled with wooden, color-coded filing cabinets. In the one marked with a green flag, I had found a manila folder marked F94. Someone had written the date when this file was first placed into the archives, and that date was 22 years ago. There were only two clippings inside the folder. The first was a cheap photocopy of an original page from the *Argus Daily Dispatch*, dated March 3, 1850. The article was, in essence, a plea for information about a woman in her thirties and a little girl who must have been her daughter. Both had been accused of acting in a 'shockingly violent manner' toward a party of choir singers who had been traveling on something called Cattle Road east of Blaine Fountain in Carolinus County and had to stop because of a broken carriage wheel. There had been some sort of struggle after the unidentified woman and the girl emerged from the woods on foot, and the carriage driver had been taken to a hospital. The two poor wretches had been remanded into custody and were described as utterly incapable of speech, most likely mute from birth. The second clipping was also from the *Argus Daily Dispatch*. It was published eleven months after the first. The authorities, searching for a missing old man with dementia—the father of the local constable, in fact—had come across a tiny, mostly empty cabin with a collapsed roof near the Blaine Fountain town line, the exact location maddeningly omitted by poor reporting. In what served as that moribund structure's front yard were found two shallow graves, and the bodies of two men, one about forty, the other most likely younger than twenty. Foul play was suspected in both deaths. Again, there was an appeal for any information about their identities.

Someone had made the connection between the contents of Orrin Loveland's diary and these events 22 long years before me, and without a note of explanation, had secured these clippings in a cheap manila folder to be forgotten in the university archives. I will never know who was trying to put the pieces together, or where their research eventually took them. On that day, even before I witnessed Kurt and Jill burn their phones, I had simply run out of time to find out.

An officer of the Carolinus County Police got back to me two and a half hours after I called in at 12:30 a.m. on the 21st with my concern about Kurt and his sister Jill. They had gone camping in a tract near Blaine Fountain, I told the officer, inventing a story about how they'd both been completely out of contact for two days despite assuring me they'd return to Lamont at exactly noon on Tuesday. I said nothing about either the video feed—which had never been re-established on Kurt's end after it went dark following their bizarre bonfire—or the research we'd been undertaking. I was able to give Officer Krantz the exact location of their tents and the vehicle they'd taken out there. They were amateur astronomers, I said, who thought the tract would be a good isolated spot to set up their telescopes. Krantz had driven out as a courtesy. What he reported back to me was very confusing. There had been no sign of Kurt's SUV, he said, and a hike through the dark to the spot in question revealed nothing at all—not even any real

sign that they'd been camping there. If they'd been there, they'd taken all traces with them and left. He and I reviewed the directions I'd given him and he described his path with perfect accuracy. He'd even wandered a little further and called out several times to anyone who might be in the area. He'd gotten no response. Trying to get whatever information I could from him, I asked him how familiar he was with that area. But he'd been with the Loringore precinct for less than a year and was of no more help to me.

The thought of exploring the tract myself in the dark, in my condition, was too intimidating. And so I tried to sleep some, setting my alarm for 5 a.m. The ringing of my phone woke me before first light. The one person who could conceivably have gone with me into the tract without me worrying intensely for his safety was finally returning the somewhat pleading message I'd left for him the night before. At the age of 65, Pavel Kloug, a professional sailor since he was thirteen, was still built like a weightlifter. He was also the only person I'd ever encountered whose claims to psychic abilities had never been disproven by anyone. I had given up on his help already though; there just wouldn't be enough time now for him to reach me from Pennsylvania. Still, I began to explain the situation to him. But as I thought he might, he stopped me almost immediately. His bitterness toward me seeped through the phone like black oil. He said he'd always known that one day, my slipshod research methods and my blind spots would ruin me. He accused me once again of almost costing one life during the disaster at Hengist Castle. He disconnected from the call with a pitying chuckle. There wasn't anything I could say in my defense.

I took three aspirin and made my way out to my car for the trip to the tract. My pain level that morning was, by unfortunate coincidence, unusually high. For some small sliver of peace of mind, I brought with me the only lethal weapon I owned, which was a hunting knife an uncle had given to me ten years before, and which had gone utterly unused. My hope was that I would find nothing, that I would have missed Kurt and Jill because they were even now driving back to Lamont. If that were the case, we could laugh about my foolish journey later.

The morning was cold and the sun tried vainly here and there to break through the clouds. I was so absorbed in my thoughts that I missed the turn onto Route 4. Another ten minutes lost. I listened to classical music as I drove. As usual, there was no real traffic, especially at this sleepy hour. In front of the little antique and frame shop which represented the very last place of business one saw before making the final turn down Greentown Road toward the tract, a police car was parked, its emergency flashers on. I tried not to think again of the inexplicable crime statistics I'd found relating to this sparsely populated area, and looked away.

And how futile it was that I found myself trying to analytically monitor my thoughts for disturbing anomalies or gaps as I turned onto Greentown and made my way, so paranoid that another return to the tract would trigger something in me, make me descend quickly back into that foggy mental state that had been caused by overexposure to whatever was out here. Or maybe I had built up a tolerance. Only two cars came down Greentown Road, and of course there were none on the unmarked two-mile dirt road that branched off it. I don't think I had ever seen one traveling there. I got a jolt when far off to my left, in the woods, three deer suddenly broke into a run as I passed, at first headed right into my path but angling away instinctively before they broke the tree line.

As Officer Krantz had confirmed for me, there was, in fact, no sign of Kurt's SUV in the spot where he'd told me he'd parked. So I parked there myself. I took a deep breath, opened the driver's side door, and climbed out with my usual elderly motions, hyper-cautious not to hit my

head and experience a burst of pain I would feel down into my legs. I found the trail and set down it, forcing myself to move just a little more quickly than I was comfortable with, a dull thudding ache growing in my back, hating myself for having cancelled one too many physical therapy sessions.

I first began to feel truly afraid when emerging into the clearing where Kurt's and Jill's tents should have been. Seeing absolutely nothing there: that was very bad somehow. A couple of nights before there had been human life in this space, and now, all traces were gone. I couldn't even tell where their crude campfire had been, the one where they'd burned their cellphones. Nothing but dead grass and dirt now. With some effort I did find evidence of the small holes their tent poles had made in the cold ground. Krantz had simply missed them in the dark. Kurt's tent here, Jill's about eight feet away. It was like coming across the ghostly ruins of some extinct forest tribe. I looked all around and, having nothing but time, just stood and listened and waited for several minutes before heading off toward the west, in the general direction of the tract's true ruins: the rotting, earth-eaten heap of wood that had once comprised the stables owned by some farmer named Carl McConnell.

That mile and three-quarter walk was, to me, so long that by the time I reached the bottom of the slow rise upward toward them, I was sweating profusely, my head was pounding, and my back was throbbing like a fist was trying to punch its way out of me. I had to wait for a time before making my final ascent and stopped halfway there, wanting badly to lie down but afraid of the agony of getting back up again.

Walking the length of the pile, I studied again the way the old wood had slowly become one with the ground, how certain boards had settled at seemingly impossible angles as the rot had taken hold, how more and more detail of the grain had faded to a featureless gray and black over the decades. I saw no evidence that anything had been tampered with in the slightest. The ruins seemed entirely intact. I noticed one piece of wood alone off to one side closer to the tree line on the west side, and as I got closer to it, the sun suddenly glinted off it, as if it weren't wood at all. I realized what I was seeing just seconds before I stood over it. It was a laptop computer lying in the dead grass. Kneeling down to lift it, my spine screamed out in pain and I felt a wave of dizziness wash over me. It had happened before.

I took the computer, ice cold to the touch, past the tree line and into the woods, searching for the spot with the most shadows so that when the computer was turned on, I'd be able to defeat the glare of daylight. I sat on a fallen pine, grateful to be off my feet, and booted up the computer. It came to life with no difficulty, the battery still a quarter charged. I squinted to make out the icons on the desktop. They were mostly folders. One was marked *GGI*, my initials, and opening it I saw all the documents I'd sent to Kurt the month before relating to what I'd found of the history of the tract. Another folder was marked with the word *VIDEOS*. I opened that one and saw several icons consisting of single still frames, each dated and timed. Clicking through them, it seemed I had already watched all the videos except for one. Sorting the list by date, there was a clip that had been saved just two hours before, a fairly long one judging by how much hard drive storage it had claimed. I clicked on it.

This was not footage that had been shot carefully using the Panasonic camera Kurt had brought with him into the tract. The angle was low and skewed, as if someone had placed the laptop itself on the ground and shot the video using its cheap internal camera. The picture quality was much more grainy, especially because it was just barely dawn when recording occurred. In the frame I saw Kurt back away from the lens as if he had just pressed Record. Kurt and Jill were in

the woods, and judging by where I'd found the laptop, it must have been somewhere close. Jill was sitting on a log at such the far left edge of the frame that only her legs were visible; Kurt hadn't turned the lens far enough in her direction, an unusually clumsy act for someone who normally operated at such a high level of detail. Kurt sat down with his back against a tree ten feet away from her, and he addressed the camera. The sound was so poor I had to go into the computer's settings briefly to amplify it as much as I possibly could. I believe Kurt was speaking directly to me when he said that before he and Jill returned to Lamont, they wanted a record of a new game they'd thought up while they were out here in the middle of nowhere. They were still working on the rules, he said. Then he asked Jill if she wanted to go first, and I just barely heard her say yes. Oddly, neither of them was wearing a jacket or coat despite the fact that it was so very cold. Kurt rolled up the left sleeve of his flannel shirt and Jill entered the frame fully, moving over to him. She knelt down in the leaves beside him, took his forearm in her right hand, and bent her head to it. Kurt was expressionless, watching her with what seemed like only mild interest. The back's of Jill's head was to the camera when she seemed to put her mouth directly onto Kurt's forearm, at which point she went very still. Kurt's face changed then, becoming flushed and red in an instant, and Jill's head began to shake left and right. She lifted her head suddenly and Kurt let out a cry of pain. There was a gash on his forearm as Jill retreated to where she had sat before, only her legs visible in the frame. Kurt was bleeding. He did nothing to stop it, or even examine the wound, while Jill's hands undid the laces of the Timberland boot on her right foot, shucking both the boot and her sock off. Kurt moved over to her and knelt down, as she had for him. He cradled her foot and lifted it toward him, cocked his head this way and that, looking for a certain spot, and then he put his mouth on the soft underside of her right heel. The camera angle showed me what happened more clearly this time. Kurt's mouth clasped firmly on his sister's heel as he sunk his teeth into it. There was only the slightest utterance of discomfort from Jill. Kurt gripped her foot tightly in both hands and started to moan with effort, tugging with his teeth. After ten seconds he yanked his head away, and with it came a spout of blood. Jill lowered her foot out of frame. As Kurt retreated and took his spot again with his back against the tree, he casually wiped her blood from his mouth. A jet that had passed overhead at that moment caught his attention and he looked up at the sky with casual interest. Then he was unbuttoning his shirt. Jill came into view again, limping a little. Kurt exposed his left shoulder blade to his sister. She knelt down as before, and lowered her head onto it, placing her left hand tenderly on his neck. Kurt craned his head to the sky. This time, as Jill clamped her teeth down into his flesh, he opened his mouth wide and cocked his head all the way back, half in pain, but half, I would swear, in pleasure. Jill's head began to shake back and forth.

I closed the video before it went on any further. I had made in eight minutes into a video whose total duration was seventeen. I scanned the woods, willing myself to go further in, but found that my will had abandoned me completely.

I took the laptop with me and started to make my way back to the spot where I'd entered the tract, downing more aspirin as I walked, the pain in my lower back growing and growing until I walked with one hand pinned permanently to my side. If I happened to plant my left foot wrong, on a patch of ground that was too uneven, white and pink light flashed inside my eyes. I would not spend another minute searching for Kurt and Jill. I had now, at least, the evidence I'd need to get the police to comb the area entirely, and if the full truth of the situation had to be told, it had to be told.

Halfway back to where they'd camped, I had no choice but to sit on the ground for a time, spent, near a thatch of bushes splitting the remains of a meadow in two. I tilted my head to look off into the woods, convinced that it was only a matter of time before I saw something in there, an

inert being that could barely be described, watching me. As it happened, one living organism did come for me: Shortly before I began to maneuver my body slowly into a standing position again, I heard a flap of wings and a giant black bird, a vulture, settled nearby. When I walked away it remained, watching me go. Fifty yards from my spot I turned and it was still there.

If I had been brave I would have veered toward the swamp where Kurt and Jill had discovered the mysterious hole, never to mention it again after their first report of it. But that never felt like an option. By the time I got to my car my heart was pounding disturbingly fast, and not just with physical pain. Every yard I grew closer to the driver's side door, the more I was convinced I wouldn't make it there at all, that I'd be intercepted. When I was safely inside and the door was locked, I saw in the rearview mirror that tears of effort had spread across my cheeks.

The engine started smoothly and I turned back down the unmarked road to trace my path out with no variation. I turned off the road a mile south and got back onto Greentown, driving at half speed, looking into the woods for any sign of anything that might give me information about Kurt and Jill. It was in vain. I brought the car up to full speed just as I passed the little house that my attacker, Bella Devere, had tried to burn down in 2008, where Marvin Litko now lived, about eight hundred yards from what I considered the entrance to the tract. Rolling by, I detected the tiniest thump as my wheels passed over a small object. I glanced into the rearview mirror and saw a shoe coming to a rest in the middle of the road after being jostled at thirty miles per hour. And I pulled the car over onto the thin, muddy shoulder.

I shut off the engine and climbed out of the car and walked slowly back up the road along a faded double yellow line that may have never been repainted once. The image of Jill's Timberlands was strong in my mind as I got closer to the shoe, which looked very similar to what she'd been wearing in the video. But looking closer I saw that in fact this shoe was far more weathered, and of cheaper manufacture. It didn't belong to anyone I knew. From my vantage point I could see the edge of Mr. Litko's front yard. There was a car in the driveway, as I believed there usually was. I picked up the shoe and carried it over there.

There was no answer to my knocks. I set the shoe down on the porch, and praying that no one inside the house would notice, I turned the doorknob to see if it was loose. It was. No one had locked it. Someone was either home or overly trusting. I decided to push my luck, opening the door a crack. I called out a hello, two times, but there was no response. I shut the door behind me and started to cross the yard again. I thought about calling the police as I went but had to remind myself that I'd get no reception out here until I got almost all the way out to Catskill Downs Road. Perhaps I could have used Litko's land line. I realize now that wouldn't have helped me.

I had stepped back on the shoulder of Greentown when I spotted something in the woods across the road. Far away, probably almost fifty yards in, I could make out someone standing beside a tree, leaning against it somewhat, facing directly away from me. Someone wearing a flannel shirt. I crossed the road and headed toward this person, stepping left and right out of the way of trees as necessary. More detail revealed itself to me as I crunched through the leaves, making my presence known from a good distance away. It was a man, definitely, wearing baggy jeans. His hair was white. He didn't move; I thought maybe he was tracking something deeper in the woods, concentrating. Twenty yards away, just before I called out to him so he wouldn't be alarmed as I approached, I saw that he was only wearing one shoe. The other was gone. Then this motionless man's weight against the tree was shifting and he was slowly crumpling, right before my eyes. He made no effort to right himself as he leaned way too far to his left and

collapsed into the leaves like a bag of sand. I called out and hobbled to him as fast as I could. He had fallen face down with an empty thud, with his left arm pinned beneath him. There was a bloodstain on the tree where he had been leaning, and blood on the ground beneath me, more and more of it as I got to where he lay. I knelt and struggled to turn him over; he was very heavy. It was Marvin Litko. He had been gravely wounded on his left side; his shirt was drenched in blood there. For the first time, I saw what he may have been looking at as he'd leaned against that tree, dying. It was the unnaturally bent and crumpled body of Kurt Kapremian, about thirty yards further in. His lifeless eyes stared directly at me.

There were soft footsteps behind me in the leaves. I turned and stood, sweat trickling down into my eyes. Jill Kapremian was standing beside a tree that I had passed sixty seconds before. She must have watched me go right by. She was holding a long chopping axe in her hands. A leaf was stuck to its head, adhered to it by a large blotch of dark blood. She looked at me with wide, questioning eyes and set one foot ahead of the other, gently, as if she were afraid to scare me away. The entire left side of her mouth had suffered a tremendous wound, a sizeable portion of skin completely torn away, or bitten away, and completely untreated. She was deathly pale. *Why do all you bugs come so close*, she asked me, *why do all you bugs come so close?* She began to raise the axe as she came forward, and I believe she asked that question a third time before I pulled the hunting knife from my belt and moved forward as swiftly as I could before the axe could be lifted fully over Jill's head for a single downswing. It was as if she could not even conceive of my act of defense; her surprise as the knife plunged into her chest was as mild as if I had told her we were due for rain despite the sporadic sunshine. She made a small wet sound in her throat and sank to her knees, dropping the axe into the leaves, and when my right hand opened again the knife was gone. Jill collapsed onto her side, a twisted and inadvertent grin locked on her face. She turned over, got to her knees, and took three bizarre and directionless steps while still on them, clomping forward as if she were pretending to be a monster in a child's game of pretend, and then she fell again not ten feet from Marvin Litko. Jill must have turned on Kurt right after their game, finally perceiving him to be a genuine threat to the tract, then made her way to Litko's house. Or maybe that's where she'd gotten the axe. With two corpses at my feet, I turned to face the road again, but I would never get back to it, because my way through the woods was now blocked by a jagged row of many, many tall, inert armless figures with heads so anatomically distorted that it seemed each was wearing a cruel oversized wax mask atop a body rooted to the ground by a single thick, featureless stump. Their eyes were not where they should have been. For all I knew I may still have been screaming when someone in authority came hours later, and took me away.

As I write this I am currently in the basement of a police station in Loringore, waiting to be taken somewhere else, but the details of where I might go next are unclear. In searching the tract, the authorities must have already come across the hole near the swamp that Kurt spoke of, the one I never got to see, or at least they're very close to finding it. And if not that one, another maybe. That's where things might get really interesting, I suppose. In relating this story, it's curious how I've spelled some people's names wrong, and mixed up directions and the names of roads, and dates and times. I forget even if I've told you about where they found Kurt's SUV. This has not been the telling of a sane man. I suppose if I were to ever venture into the tract again, I'd have maybe one hour before the undetectable voices of those who inhabit it drive me mad in their efforts to convert me into a guardian. Maybe less than an hour, because seeing what I saw in the woods at the end has probably done me permanent damage.

I sit here now, waiting for news. And I wonder how many women they happen to have combing the tract for evidence, and if even now they're being sung to without even realizing it, in tones only they can comprehend. I wonder how many of them will have to keep going back, spending more and more time there as their discoveries mount, their minds gently invaded over the course of days. Perhaps like Bella Devere, like Darcy and June Loveland, like Jill Kapremian, they'll come to embrace the singing as an invitation to a profound mission, one of relentless and unending protection, maybe one that will require great violence to achieve.

boardwalk

Nine years I chased Olivia. Nine years, can it be? Dortmund, Kiel, La Paz, La Serena, Fortaleza. Then, weeks ago, I found myself driving east down Route 522 in the lower part of a state I'd never been to, until it became Ocean Boulevard. At 10 o'clock at night everything was lit up, all the miniature golf courses, the seafood restaurants, the doughnut shops, the t-shirt stores. Dairy Queen, Sunsatons, Ronny's Beach Shack, the Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum. Traffic was light; it was twenty degrees outside. I took a right onto 3rd Street and cruised through a quiet, scruffy, sandy neighborhood six blocks from the beach. Crooked houses with names like Seaswept, Starfish Cove, August House, rooms with kitchenettes available by the week, see you next May. I parked the car and texted Binky that I was here and he answered in five seconds.

I walked to 6th Street and got inside his pickup truck. For the last time I said, *How do you know it's her*, and he said she hadn't moved from the house in two days and two nights; who else would she be? The information was reliable. He'd slept maybe six hours in all that time. From that moment on we would each do a shift. The spot Binky had chosen was a clever one, screened in two directions by trees and a trailer park beside the neighborhood. I sent him off to go eat pancakes and check into the Spindrift Inn, \$44 a night, and I pulled into the space ten minutes after he'd left. And I watched the house, and watched it for eleven hours.

Olivia did not come out. When my shift was over I walked the boardwalk, watched the people who still found something beautiful here in wintertime. I drifted through the souvenir shops that had stayed open, and ate pizza. But I never stayed out for more than two hours, and never at night. At night I parked on Cross Keys Street and watched what I could of the house from the other side of it. Twice the lights went on, late at night, and Binky and I talked over the radio, ready to move. But we didn't have to.

On the third night Binky called me and told me she was leaving the house. Right through the front door she went, and walked on foot down 6th Street toward the west end of town. She wore a baggy t-shirt and old jeans. I started the car and looped around toward Jones Avenue and parked the car about a mile down, and I waited. Against my wishes, Binky set out on foot, all three hundred pounds of him. I told him that if he got closer than three blocks she would know, and he told me not to worry.

There was only so much we could do. But then Binky saw her. She'd gone north. He told me she was walking across a park, some connected athletic fields that served the year-round residents. I told him to not even update me until something happened.

Twenty minutes went by. Every three or so he would tap his handset just to let me know he was still there and nothing had changed.

At 1:15 he said there was someone else in the park, and she was slowly walking toward him. *Let her go*, I said. *You can't get any closer. This is how we'll find out it's her.* Some man, walking his dog, he said, but he could barely see, they were both so far away now. Finally I told him to just walk away, leave, go back to the house. *You want me to break in, look around?* he asked, but no, she was more clever than that, she would have a fake ID under the name of the supposed renter, and leave evidence of a normal vacationer. We'd find out nothing.

We saw her return two hours later, both us sitting in his pickup. Her hair was blonde, done up in a ponytail. The body didn't seem right somehow. I had a bad feeling.

Binky had a police scanner, and at a little past five came the chatter we were waiting for. They'd found a body. That was all we needed. It was the first homicide in Brevard Beach in fourteen years. Adrenalin surged through me. Binky just stared into space, scratching his huge beard with both hands, contemplating. All we needed was time, then, to wait her out. The next time she left that house would be the last time.

Four days, four long days. I watched the house, drank at the Greene Turtle, slept at the Budget Inn near Captain D's, ate subs from Mario's Snack Shack, walked the boardwalk, back and forth. Rode the ferris wheel once, it was still open, looked down on the town to see if I could see 6th Street. Couldn't though.

It was on the night I got drunk that she emerged again. Stupid. Stupid. So drunk I blacked out, so drunk I fell asleep against the side of a beach umbrella rental hut, abandoned since September, right out there on the sand. A remorseful, suicidal binge. The crackling of the radio woke me up. *Jesus Christ*, Binky was saying, *where are you, she's moving.* He was on Haven Avenue, watching her through binoculars as she walked onto the beach at 5:51 a.m. I looked off to my left. It was still full dark. The cheap hotels were lit up and glowing all along the boardwalk behind me. I staggered to my feet and told Binky that if she went south, I would be waiting for her. He asked me if I would be ready and I told him yes, I had what I needed, I always had what I needed.

I moved around to the other side of the shack, screened off from view. God, it was cold. I peered around it and looked at the waves crashing on the beach. Yes, she was smart. The lights didn't reach that far and everything from the boardwalk would just seem black until dawn.

Binky radioed me that she was going south. I was eight blocks away. She had maybe 45 minutes before she'd have to be back in the house. *What is she doing?* I asked him, and Binky said, *I think she's just watching the waves.*

She eventually got to me, and moved beyond me. Her hair was untied now. She faced the ocean as she walked, careful not to get too close to the surf. No coat. When a tiny sliver of blue cracked the sky I shut off my radio and left my spot. I was going to end everything now, one way or another.

And it really was sadness I felt as I walked across the sand, trailing her, because she didn't know I was there. She should have known, but she didn't, and that meant she was almost done, she

had very little left of what she was. That fact that she was out this late, that's what made it so obvious.

Soon there was just enough gray light on the beach to make out the back of her t-shirt. Hammerhead's Seafood, it read, Best Lobster at the Beach. She wouldn't have eaten there. Before Binky had arrived in town she must have bought that shirt from the gift shop, just to have it, on some night when she'd gone walking, walking down the boardwalk past the arcade and the Old Time photos booth and Dippin' Dots.

Even when I began to run, she didn't turn. I was within five steps of her when she finally did. A look on her face not of surprise but of mild curiosity. When I slammed into her I caught a whiff of her perfume. I spent weeks trying to find out what it was as that memory faded. Princess, by Vera Wang.

She crashed to the sand facing upwards, exactly as I needed her to be, and I fell on top of her, and I had the stake out in a half second, and I raised it high above my head, and she thrust her hands up, breaking my nose as she snarled. But every bit of my strength was with me and the stake came down exactly twice, ending a story that maybe one day I'll tell at the bar during happy hour at Pirate's Launch on 9th Street, painfully drunk, sunburned, wearing sandals and shorts in the heat, a beach bum still pining for a tall blonde who broke his mortal heart from afar long ago, but finally got what she deserved.

photographs

I won't explain here what a paranormal brokerage is, because officially, they don't exist. But I will tell you what led me to offer a considerable amount of money to one to examine a certain set of objects: the Chillian Witch photographs.

The Chillian Witch legend began in 1962 when there were two disappearances in the mountains near the North Carolina border within ten months of each other, with some striking similarities. Both of the vanished were men, hikers, young, obviously handsome, in unusually stellar physical shape, both of them intending to walk the back half of the forty-mile Aries trail alone. Brown hair, blue eyes. Gone without a trace, ten months apart. The forest in that area is deep and wide, and so of course the stories spiraled quickly out of control. The Chillian Witch apparently had specific tastes in the men she supposedly abducted, used, and then devoured.

In December of that year, the police there received a handwritten note in feminine handwriting postmarked from the town of Gladden, forty miles away. It said, I HAVE KILLED YOUR WITCH, BUT SHE STILL HAS POWER. Signed by someone calling herself 'Ilva.' A crude map had been drawn on the other side of the note, marked by an X. The map generally outlined the path of the Aries trail. The cartographer had even dotted it with trees in the shape of lowercase Vs.

A single very dubious detective volunteered to drive out to Chillian and follow the map's route as his last bit of official business before heading off with his family for a three-day weekend. The backup caused by a car crash on a side road delayed him for more than hour, and so it was

full night by the time he had made it a mile and a half into the woods to the spot marked with the X. He was expecting to look around for fifteen minutes in the cold and find nothing.

But in that spot, one of very few benches in the entire forest had been altered. Someone had cocooned it entirely in a large dark sheet, and they hadn't ended there. About two dozen tree branches several feet in length lay against the bench, seeming to protect it. These were found later to have been broken off nearby pines, probably by hand. The detective removed them and lifted the bench off the ground just enough to free the corners of the sheet, and then he lifted it and shone his flashlight downwards.

The woman who had been placed on the bench was never identified. In age she appeared about thirty. She was dressed in what looked at first like very dirty and ragged hospital fatigues, and this was proven correct. A numbered label on them traced them to a hospital a hundred miles away, one which had not issued such a garment to its employees for more than twenty-five years. The woman had striking green eyes, and she had no hair anywhere on her body. The bottoms of her feet were so heavily tattooed they appeared almost black. The patterns described a dense weaving of vines. This last detail was concealed from the public to weed out false confessions. So too was the fact that there was a single small thumbprint in the middle of her forehead. To the naked eye, it looked like it had been made in blood, but analysis revealed that it was composed entirely of varied and unrelated insect matter, as if someone had crushed a handful of them into a paste in order to leave this mark. The thumbprint's owner was never identified either. The coroner found no evidence of foul play whatsoever, or even abuse. The woman's life functions had simply ceased.

The Aries trail doesn't exist anymore, I probably don't have to tell you. This past March, I got a call from an associate who told me that the price to look at the Chillum Witch photographs had finally come within my acceptable range, and if I was willing, he could give me a cellphone number and the process of seeing them could begin, thanks partly to the gambling debts run up by a Bath County beat cop who wasn't even born when the legend took hold. That's the way these things usually go. One person who can be bought because of a weakness.

The seven photographs had been sealed inside a simple manila envelope and officially lost by a clumsy detective, who, in actuality, had known exactly what he was doing, who had come to understand the rather distressing problem with them. And one night this past May I was able to drive to a very nice conference room in a building in Washington DC owned by Citibank, where the photographs could be examined while a woman in a gray business suit, whose name I was not allowed to know, stood outside the door, waiting to usher me back out onto K Street after a maximum of fifteen minutes had gone by. The monetary transaction that secured me this permission went through PayPal.

Exactly eight of the two dozen or so people in law enforcement and evidence preparation who had laid eyes on those photographs back in 1962 had gone insane. Not cinematically, no, though they were all taken ill in some form immediately. It was easy enough to ascribe their attacks to job stress, and so that was what was done, but there were five suicide attempts over the ensuing four years, and a total of twenty-four separate incidents of hospitalization for depression, paranoia, dissociative episodes, and extreme paradoxical insomnia.

The evidence photographs inside the manila envelope had in common exactly one thing, which was that the unidentified female's stark green eyes could be seen in them. They were all head

shots of the body. These were the ones that most of the eight sufferers described at various times to their doctors over the years.

So I had a one in three chance of becoming like them if I opened that envelope. I had a one in three chance of inexplicably seeing my own face in those photographs, seeing my own body on that bench, a photographic image of my own corpse so vivid and lasting that it would eat my mind away no matter how many drugs doctors might hook me on. The curse of the unidentified Chillian Witch was to always see oneself in those pictures.

When I was alone with the envelope, I went to the window and looked down on the street below. It was ten o'clock on a Friday night. Couples were headed out to bars, shivering, laughing, having no idea what this world holds if you look into just the right places, if you wait and watch and listen. The red-haired woman who'd let me in was standing guard with her back to the glass wall. She only had one hand for some reason. Not even an artificial one to replace it.

I'd been told the photos hadn't been examined in fifteen years. My affairs were in order, so I turned the conference room lights up a little higher using the dimmer on the wall, and I sat down and peeled back the piece of Scotch tape.

I really only need to describe one of those photos, which was in fact the first one to be developed properly, the first one anybody ever saw of the corpse of the Chillian Witch in 1962. The crime scene photographer had crouched to her eye level. She was lying on her stomach. Her forehead, marked with that thumbprint, was turned toward the trail, her eyes wide open, staring. If you close your eyes right now, your imagination will fill in the blanks, because I'm sure you know what the lighting in the picture is like. It was late at night in the dark winter woods, and the photographer had to use a primitive bright flash, and so in the foreground the dead woman is staring into the lens, her face washed out and colorless on the old film. Behind her you can see details of the sheet the entire bench was wrapped in. That detail tapers off quickly. You can see by the light of the flash bulb the branches of the closest tree, but the rest of the frame behind that is just blackness, infinite nothingness. As a child, I was always riveted by that effect of the flash, creating a bordering dark around people so deep it offered a mystery in even the happiest photograph, as if the dark were reaching out to surround men, women, children.

No, I did not see myself in that crime scene photograph. The face I saw remained that of the dead Chillian Witch. I stared at it for thirty seconds and then I looked away, waiting, sitting in that comfortable leather conference room chair. I heard a playful shout down on the street, some college kid telling another one to run for a cab. I had survived. Whatever twitch of psychology led the others into some abyss, I just do not possess it.

One day I suppose I'll tell you a story that isn't ever followed in time by another, and you'll know by my apparently endless absence that I was contacted once again about something being made available ever so briefly through that brokerage in Warsaw, and I paid what I had to pay, except ... things did not go as planned. But at least I met my end knowing something you never will.

family

My name is Gabriel Petrov. In early June of 2016, my sister and I toured Russia and Latvia together; our family line traced back there and we both spoke some Russian, and it was time, the doctors said, before what might be her final chemotherapy treatments. On a beautiful day near dusk we crossed Red Square for the first time, taking picture after picture. Tabby got tired kind of quickly, and we were sitting in front of St. Basil's cathedral, people-watching, when I asked her what she made of some people staring at us from about thirty yards away, on the vast open commons. She couldn't see who I was talking about, so I gestured, trying to be subtle, but again, she seemed unable to pick the people out from all the other tourists and gawkers on the square.

I pointed to a man and woman standing with their two children, all four of them seemingly transfixed by us—or else they were staring at the entrance of the building behind us, I couldn't tell. The parents were in their forties maybe. They had a little blonde girl and a boy in a wheelchair of about the same age from what I could tell. Tabby couldn't for the life of her see who I was gesturing at. I laughed, stood up, and made as if to walk toward them. Tabby said in a light-hearted way, *Maybe my eyes are going too, why not.* Exasperated, I described them for her, but now she frowned, suspecting I was playing a joke on her. And I stopped insisting; I was confused now, and I didn't want to upset her. The family remained just where they were, looking at us, and I came back to the steps, feeling very strange. When I glanced up again, they were gone. Disappeared into the tourist crowd, but there weren't that many people to just swallow them up like that.

Two months later I was in a movie theater in Bowie, Maryland, watching some new superhero flick with an unemployed friend of mine, a lazy Tuesday matinee, one of our favorite rituals. Halfway through the end credits my friend began to review it somewhat loudly, as he always did, but I wasn't really hearing him. I'd seen something off to the right, down near the first row; we were all the way at the back. Standing near the rear exit of the theater, in the shadows, the bright white letters on the movie screen lighting them ever so slightly from the side, were a man, woman, and two children, the little girl close beside her crippled brother. They were in a tight square, the parents behind the kids. Looking at me as the seconds passed. When the lights came up I stood woozily as my friend kept asking me what was wrong. But in pulling on my arm he had caused me to look back at him, and that was all it took for the people to disappear. There was no one near the exit anymore as the last moviegoers filed out of the theater.

In mid-August, I met my best friend from Alcoholics Anonymous, Treva, in a coffeehouse in south Baltimore, four blocks from the used bookstore I'd owned for fifteen years. Treva was unlike anyone I'd ever known. She'd be turning eighty-five in the spring but she had more energy, savvy, and style than most women half her age. If she ever slept, I never knew about it. She was out dancing four nights a week and liked to stay out late at diners regaling people from our AA meetings with stories of her three decades as a stills photographer for Warner Brothers through the mid-seventies. She called everyone 'My dear.' She ordered a giant mocha and had me tell her everything that was worrying me about my visions of the family, of which there had been a third vision the week before, as I walked through an outdoor Irish festival in Patterson Park. This time I'd been just plain frightened. I had run toward them through a very light rain, but didn't get to within a hundred feet before they'd vanished, leaving me with the shakes and the conviction that I was going mad.

I started to cry a little as I told her the story, because now my sobriety was very much being tested, twelve years of sweat and determination and some pretty dark moments. Treva had a theory that the stressors of my life were all coming together in this one window of time—my sister's slow fade toward what felt like an inevitable death, the financial struggles of the store, my ex-wife's remarriage. A long time ago when I'd first met Treva, I'd talked a lot about how my greatest fear about my drinking was that I might get into a car wreck and seriously hurt or even kill someone. Treva thought that family might represent the typical family of my imagination, the family I might destroy one night on a country road if I ever lifted a glass of wine or a scotch and soda to my lips again. Maybe the visions were a way of my brain warning me of the consequences which I hadn't thought much about in a long time. It made sense to me, and I briefly felt better.

The next time I saw Treva, she was beside me at my sister's funeral. Tabby had gone more quickly than any of us had anticipated. On August 21 she'd gotten terribly weak at work, and five days later she lost consciousness for the last time. And that was it. Forty-four years old. And it was so strange, because the day of her funeral was so incredibly beautiful, seventy-four degrees, and the kind of blue sky that didn't actually let any sun through the patches of white clouds, just the way I liked it, such an anomaly that Treva made me promise I'd never forget that little detail about the day Tabby was buried.

But I would remember something else about that day. When the people who had gathered began to break apart and walk through the cemetery back to their cars, I went in the opposite direction from all of them, needing to be alone, feeling on the verge of a total breakdown. I needed darkness, and I stepped into a tiny white mausoleum dedicated to veterans of World War II, lit only by electric candles. I waited for the tears to come. But they wouldn't. When I turned and looked past the shadows out at the daylight again, the family was out there, standing on the other side of a thin sliver of brackish pond. More vivid than they'd ever been before under the flawless sky.

The woman, I saw, did not have short hair as I had believed; it was merely tied back. The man was not completely shaven. Their clothes were so plain and dark that they almost looked like Mennonites. Their expressions were neither threatening nor friendly, just ... expectant somehow. The little girl had her hand on the back of the little boy's wheelchair, and now I noticed a curious detail, which was that the wheelchair was old, the design like something built long, long before the war which eventually bore the memorial I stood within, a wheelchair made of iron and wood.

I stepped out of the mausoleum and called out to them this time, I asked them what they wanted. Of course, there was no response. And then, the tears really came, fogging my sight so badly that it caused them to shimmer out of existence. It was my ex-wife who eventually came and found me, worried about my sobriety more than anything else, and all the wounds I carried from my time with her dissolved that afternoon under the weight of agonies even more immediate and cruel.

Thus began the medical chapter of my ordeal, subjecting myself to whatever tests anyone could think of. Psychiatrists wanted to prescribe something, of course; they each had their own theories about what was wrong with me. One told me to read up about something called Charles Bonnet Syndrome and its hallucinations which tended to strike people slowly going blind.

Another wanted to approach my visions as a possible symptom of schizophrenia. I had to pay out of pocket for a CAT scan because no one would officially recommend it. It came back completely clear. It took only a few weeks for me to feel I was quickly exhausting the somatic possibilities. I went to two AA meetings a day to keep me from thoughts of drinking, and Treva was always around for me.

That did not stop me from seeing the family again. Late on a Friday night I was in the dirty storage unit on the top floor of an old apartment building in Federal Hill. It's where I kept my store's financial records and some of the more expensive books I needed to protect. I had been going through box after box of invoices when I happened to glance through the window that looked downwards at the park.

They were out there under a lamppost, the four of them. I looked away immediately this time. I stopped what I was doing, locked up, took the rickety elevator to the first floor, and walked directly to Pub Dog on East Cross Street. I sat at the bar with a club soda and drowned myself in the sounds of human voices for two hours. And then I went out and walked to the park. I stood in the place where the family had stood. I knelt down and placed my hand on the grass to feel if it was warmer or colder. But there was no evidence they had ever been here.

The next Tuesday I was standing in the religion and spirituality section of the bookstore, part of a rather forlorn cave with a low ceiling, when a middle-aged man with long hair well down his back and round-framed glasses asked me if we had a book called *The Nine Eyes of Consciousness*. I had never heard of that one. He said it had been banned in Europe in the late nineteenth century for its advocacy of suicide. I offered to try to order it for him, but he said he'd been on that hunt for a while, and had only found a copy in the past through scrounging through college libraries and used bookstores. Standing there in a withered trenchcoat, he looked at me very intently. It was a little unnerving. He wanted to know the kinds of things I read, if I was familiar with Edgar Cayce, Karlis Osis, Montague Summers. Before I had to break away from him at the sound of the bell over the front door of the store, he told me he'd like to 'roll the glass for me sometime.' What's that? I asked. It was a method of divination, he said.

My store's longest tenured employee, Christine, who had applied for a job in financial desperation after dropping out of college in the nineties and had never left, teased me after he was gone that I wasn't getting any better at dealing with weirdos. But she had no idea who I believed that man truly was. I would encounter him again, and by then, I would be sure that I had been speaking to my brother all along.

If you were to ask me the exact date and time of the lowest I fell during that period, the deepest I descended, you would just have to check my phone records to see when it was that Treva's phone rang late at night after she hadn't heard from me in a week and had been trying to track me down, worried by the way I had seemed so depressed that my very speech seemed to be slowing. When she picked up she heard me crying and telling her to come over to my house right away, because I had the family trapped in my basement. I'd seen them down there in a tall mirror lying against the water heater, and I'd galloped up the creaky wooden steps and slammed the door behind me, terrified at how close they'd come, getting only the fastest glimpse before I lost my nerve and fled. *Come now, now*, I cried, and Treva had, God bless her soul. A half hour after the call she entered my house to find me sitting on the edge of my bed, shaking. Together we went through the kitchen and stood at the door leading down to the

basement. We both knew that there would be nothing down there, of course we both knew it, but in her eyes I saw the kind of fear I'd never seen in another human being. It wasn't fear for my sanity. She was afraid of what she might see.

I opened the door and we started down. But I had to stop after two steps. I shut my eyes tight and asked her to go ahead of me, pleading for an eighty-five-year old woman to face something I didn't have the guts to. I felt no relief when she confirmed that the mirror reflected only the empty basement and a treadmill I'd hooded years before. I opened my eyes. I approached the mirror and extended my hand, drawing my finger along a crack that ran through its center. I told her it had never been there before. Was I right about the crack? I just didn't know.

My sister's financial affairs were resolved with a final visit to an attorney's office. There I got a bit of surprise. Ownership of the family cabin in Pennsylvania was being turned over to me, with the option of keeping it instead of it being automatically sold for charity, as I had thought my sister had arranged for. I signed the papers and now was given a choice to make. Neither I nor my sister had seen it for more than ten years and I was sure it was falling apart, but in my mind now grew the thought of driving up to Tartown and staying for a week there, all alone, no matter what condition it was in. I had stopped being afraid of lapsing into drinking because I knew somehow it would be the end of me this time, the absolute end, and it just wasn't time to go. There was something new compelling me to live, and that was the mystery I had found myself in.

I'd started to have the feeling that the family wanted something of me. Certain physical details of their faces still eluded me, but their expressions did not, their expressions of humility and sad longing. I decided that I would let things progress, and be alone to face it. I look back now and I see this thinking was just a form of death wish.

It was a ninety-minute drive to the quiet town of Waynesboro, and only about fifteen minutes from there to the cabin. The closest other dwelling was about a mile away.

I had never felt at peace there during the odd weeks in summer we spent in the cabin as kids. The sense of mountain desolation that had enshrouded and intimidated me even when I was a kid, just for a few days each year, was part of what had caused me to move to the city when I was nineteen and never look back. Now, it was wintertime.

The swingset my father had built behind the cabin thirty-eight years before was still up, so I sat on it for a time, smoking a cigarette, looking into the woods as the sun started to fade. With the trees so bare I could see all the way to the withered remains of the historic blast furnace whose purpose and origin I never fully understood, and which to me as a kid seemed like the place the devil might live. Then into the cabin I carried not much more than a backpack and my duffel bag. I hadn't even been shopping for food yet.

The place was as barren and dark as I expected but strangely well-kept. Someone had obviously been out here fairly recently. Still no TV, and just the bare minimum of lights on the bottom floor, but the chair in the corner near the front door, I didn't recognize.

There was a slip of paper on an endtable I'd once scratched my initials into, and had caught holy hell for. The paper was held down by a tiny rubber eraser in the shape of a pig. It was a note

from my sister. She was saying hello. In the expectation that I might want to see the cabin again and even stay here, she'd had a friend from town bring in a couple of new pieces of thrift store furniture, and a service had come in and dusted a bit. *Love your ugly mug*, she signed off, as she always had. She'd written this one month before she died.

When I'd finished having my tears for the afternoon, sitting in that poorly upholstered chair I'd never known before, it was almost dark. I got up and started to go into the kitchen. Before I turned the corner into it, though, I stopped. I'd suddenly begun to feel very warm underneath my skin, from head to foot.

They were in the kitchen, waiting for me. The father and mother opposite each other at the small mango wood table, the children occupying the other two chairs, the boy's wheelchair nowhere in sight. Eight feet away from me, sitting in the fading light of dusk. They were all looking at me, as usual. They were as vivid as anything I've ever seen. Instead of panicking, I found myself lost in the little details of their faces, the details I could never notice until now, so close. The father, graying around the temples, his beard already growing back from a morning shave, it seemed. He was very skinny. His clothes were those of a laborer from a time long past, but he didn't look like he was built for it. The wife's hair was more brown than black, which had been my first impression. Her eyes, her nose, her ears, seeming very small. The little girl's plain brown dress had been patched on the left shoulder. The boy, his hair shaggy and tousled, seemed to be the only one who regarded me with any trepidation. The others were merely... I want to say *content* with my presence.

I stepped forward. I paused after that first step for a reaction, but there was none. And I decided I would break the spell now before they slipped away again. Consciously keeping myself from blinking lest they disappear, I moved ever closer to the woman. Her husband tilted his head a little in only mild curiosity. Her eyes locked with mine.

When I was confident she would never move, I reached my right hand slowly out to the woman's shoulder. And I touched it. She was warm, like any real person would be. The husband's expression became questioning. The little boy only looked down at the table now, as if being scolded. And the wife suddenly looked so desperately sad, so pained, that I lifted my hand shamefully. It was as if I'd broken some contract with her, with them all, by getting too close. This was not what they wanted. I had hurt them.

I backed away, turning my palms upward in apology. Gently I reached to my left and turned the light switch on—and that was all it took to send them back into the world beyond this one, leaving four empty chairs and an empty wooden bowl in the center of the table, the one from Crate and Barrel I'd bought for my mother for Christmas when I was in college.

Seven weeks later, to the day, Treva woke up in her small apartment in Fells Point and made up her mind to drive to Tartown. Despite my assurances on the phone that I was all right, that I had simply decided at some point that it was better for me to stay up there and keep going with my voluntary retreat until spring, and that I was still going to the AA club in town every third day, she just couldn't believe I was okay anymore. Her eyes were getting very bad and she hadn't driven herself anywhere in two years, but into her Ford Escort she climbed and made the trip in a cold light rain, getting lost twice.

When the front door of the cabin opened, she had to admit I looked fine. I invited her in and we talked for a time about what was going on with our AA friends back in town, and about how I was doing the scheduling for the store in my absence, that kind of thing. She wanted to see the whole place and hear all my childhood memories of it. I made us grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch and we sat with hot tea in the living room by the fire.

How many times have you seen them since you came? she asked me eventually. I told her the truth: I saw them at least twice a week now, in various parts of the house, and on the land behind it, and even once in the woods. Subtle things had changed. Where before I had been the disturbing focus of their attention, now it felt like they had comfortably taken up residence in the cabin, and when they appeared to me, it was like watching a theatrical scene about a pioneer family going about their daily business at their homestead, though they never actually did anything. Sometimes the children sat together in the smaller of the two bedrooms upstairs, as if they had just finished playing. I'd see the man and wife standing together and looking through the trees, with coats on. I'd gone into the horrid, dank basement once and turned on the light to see the husband hunched over the old rolltop desk my father had picked up at a flea market and meant to refurbish. The man's head was in his hands and he was thinking, concentrating. Very slowly he had turned to me, then back again.

Often the family merely sat at the kitchen table. Once the husband was holding the hand of the little girl, and the woman, whose eyes remained closed through my vision, was clutching something in her left hand, below the tabletop, some object no bigger than the size of her palm. I could only see the circular top of the object, nothing more. The family breathed and blinked like anyone else.

Just a few days after I'd first seen them in the cabin, I went into the main bedroom to find the boy's wheelchair there, but he himself nowhere in sight. I studied the wheelchair, but I didn't take a picture; the one time I'd tried that with the full family, there had been nothing in the frame but the background, so I knew that was useless. I made notes on the wheelchair's ancient construction, like nothing I'd ever seen before. I rolled it back and forth for a moment, amazed by how heavy it was, but again got that shameful feeling of intruding upon their realm. I'd made no more attempts to make physical contact.

I told Treva I sensed these people were content here, and that they wanted me near. I'd given up aggressively pursuing solutions to the situation and felt I would just leave at some point to see if they... followed. And if they did... then that would be different. Part of the reason I did not want to return was my dread that it would prove I could never be rid of them.

It was strange, I'd developed a fondness for them. *You've got to go back to the doctor's*, Treva warned me, but I told her no, I'd been checked out yet again a couple of times in Waynesboro. I had a lifetime of psychiatrists ahead of me if I wanted, but right now I wanted to be within myself. I had no urge to drink anymore.

Treva left me with a hug and the promise that she would call every day now, and I didn't dissuade her. I waved goodbye as she drove slowly back to the main road over an inch of snow, and I noticed something I'd been oblivious to, since I hadn't been outside in front of the house for a couple of days. There was a second set of tire tracks, faded and indistinct. They had come about halfway up the drive at some point, and then stopped, as if someone just wanted to see the house, maybe establish that it wasn't empty.

The night after that, I finished reading *Daniel Deronda* and decided to go into town for a turkey dinner at an old favorite place, Monty's Cafeteria, a roadside holdover from the nineteen-forties, cavernous and hilariously archaic by urban standards, but the locals liked it. I was there every other night, when it was very quiet. I had taken my seat and cracked open a biography of Maxim Gorky when I looked up and saw someone standing on the other side of the restaurant, a face just familiar enough to cause me to linger on it for a moment. It was a middle-aged man in curious round-framed glasses and long, flowing hair that went down to his back, the strands alternately gray and black.

He came over to my table, unsmiling, asking me if I remembered him. Aside from our encounter at the bookstore, which had only happened because his train connection to Georgia had been delayed for hours, I hadn't seen or heard from Uriah since I was five years old. He had run from us at age sixteen and never come back, never contacted us, never allowed himself to be contacted. A strange family tragedy we had all simply absorbed. The facial resemblance to my sister had been the only thing that stirred something within me. Now he wasn't even aware that she'd died, and I did not tell him.

His finding me here had not been an accident. He'd been inquiring about my whereabouts for a couple of weeks, and had on this night intended to sit in the sad bar in the adjacent room, waiting to see if I might show up. He had a feeling I would, he said, and it was not a throwaway comment; he meant it literally. He really, really wanted to speak to me, he said. Irritated, intimidated, and a little afraid, I asked nothing about his life. I just let him speak of the present as he sat there with nothing in front of him while my turkey dinner slowly began to grow cold. He was soft-spoken, centered, almost professorial despite his hippie-ish appearance.

Uriah asked me to put aside our blood connection for now and pretend he was a total stranger, which in essence he had been when he'd encountered me by chance at the bookstore. Our past connection had nothing to do with this meeting. He assured me that anything I might tell him would be just between the two of us, but he wanted to know if I had been undergoing any dramatic changes recently, if there had been any extraordinarily stressful events. To this day I don't know if he was baiting me or just trying to be delicate, because when I was evasive, he immediately put it more directly: Had I seen anything beyond this world? He had reason to believe it was true, but he would explain that later. As we spoke and my defenses weakened, I slowly saw in front of me not some unbalanced paranormal obsessive who had reemerged in search of something, but someone possessed of a strange and scary concern based on our chance reunion, setting him on a path to come all the way to Pennsylvania out of the desire to help.

It had been Uriah who'd pulled up at the cabin, just to make sure I was there and he wasn't on a fool's errand. But he hadn't been sneaking around beyond that, or tried to get inside the place. He'd just been waiting for the timing to be right. When I felt he had no selfish motive in hearing my story, neither personal nor profit, I told him the whole thing. The family, the rate of their appearances, their attitude toward me.

He took it all in thoughtfully, never questioning. He said he had read more and studied more about things that frightened people than almost anyone he'd ever known. It had taken years of isolation and ostracization. He claimed to have had no say in the matter. His course had been charted early, touched from birth, unable to be a part of a normal household among normal

people. He wanted me to listen very carefully now, and if I didn't care to believe what he told me, that was fine.

Based on what I had told him, he believed these four people I saw were spirits who had been with me a long, long time. They had once been real human beings living on the Earth, yes, but during their anonymous lives they had never known they would be my protectors after they left their mortal bodies behind.

The mother and father represented protection of both my masculine and feminine side, which every person possessed. The little girl watched over the weak, confused child within me, the one who resisted the realities of age and the enormity of free will. The little boy in his wheelchair stood watch over all the crippling infirmities I carried inside me. Their archaic clothing, their hair, and their desire to be in a place far removed from modern things—these all told us when they had lived. Yes, it had been hundreds of years ago. They had been entwined with me and my future, utterly without choice to someday become what they now were, back during the time when some laborer had built that boy's wheelchair using the primitive materials available, before any recognizable traces of my own family even existed.

Now they had become visible, explained Uriah, to draw me away to a silent place where I could think clearly and learn to be unafraid. The emotional and physical descent that had been trying to come for me through a one-way tunnel of hundreds of years was very close, and I had to be strong because the family could not be my strength much longer. They were not as powerful as they needed to be.

Why was I chosen for this? I asked. *Why were they?* I looked around me at the few people sitting in the cafeteria, oblivious to our insane conversation.

Uriah unfurled his hands on the table, palms upward, an expression of emptiness. *Where were you before our mother gave birth to you?* he asked me rather coldly. All he could do was learn the tales of others written in books it took years to find and years to comprehend, and these had given him one-thousandth of one percent of what he wanted to know. But to think that I alone had protectors was a mistake.

What is the thing that will take you down, he asked, and I told him: *Drinking.* And he said I had to never, *ever* take one drink again. *What else,* he prodded. *Loneliness,* I said. *Then find someone to love,* Uriah replied. *And you can be well. You've been so close to falling far, far. Suicide, a car wreck. But the man, woman, daughter and son mean you're so close to being well.*

What I wanted Uriah to tell me right now was how he'd first known I was in danger, and had a story to tell. He explained that once in a while as he lived his daily life, someone would stand out to him from the crowd. Not often. Every few years, maybe. Someone with a certain look. But now he was evasive in explaining to me what that look was ... a hidden color no one else could see, something in the eyes?

Ants, he said sadly. When he'd first come into the bookstore, I had been covered in them. Ants on my back, my neck, my shoulders, my face, every moment, ants crawling. So many that even the family resemblance could barely be seen through them, and he'd gone away still thinking I might be a stranger. And the ants were still there.

We left the cafeteria together. He was going to drive us to a place nearby, near the middle of town. Not far. I started to get into the passenger's seat of his old car when I saw there was someone already in there, wrapped up in a heavy winter coat. This was Uriah's wife. She was blind and deaf. He said it was better not to acknowledge her, because doing so might cause her some consternation. He never explained more.

We were in the car maybe ten minutes, turning off Wayneboro's main street and cutting through one of its older neighborhoods. We parked against the curb beside an elementary school. Uriah had me carry a heavy black sack he'd had in his trunk. It clinked as I moved it, and leaving his wife behind in the car he led me onto the playground, just barely lit. It was paved in smooth gray cement, lined for various sports and pursuits.

We stood in the cold and he told me to put the sack on the pavement and reach my left hand deep into it, letting what was inside surround it. I did as I was instructed. The sack was filled with what seemed like marbles, small and perfect glass spheres that were inexplicably very warm to the touch. He told me to move my hand, to work it into the accumulation, and grab a fistful and clench it tightly. I did so, and then we merely waited. He looked up at an airplane passing overhead.

After a full minute he told me to release the spheres and dump the entire contents of the sack onto the pavement. I hesitated and then did so. The spheres were in many colors, and they clacked against the cement and each other in a satisfying way, spreading quickly outward in all directions, like a children's game become more elaborate and expensive. Black, red, blue, yellow, white, green, the spheres rolled and struck each other as I shook them out, emptying the sack. Some rolled as much as thirty feet away before settling. When they had gone still, the dozens upon dozens of spheres looked like a star map under the weak light of the lampposts near the school's main entrance doors.

Uriah began to walk among them in his long black trenchcoat, crouching, bending over, pushing his hair back behind his ears, carefully examining all the ways they had fallen.

I stood silently, transfixed. Sometimes he would press his palm flat on the cement, his fingers splayed, gauging the distance between a gathering of the spheres as the breath plumed out of his mouth; it was very cold.

At long last he stood fully and told me that what I was looking at was not necessarily the future, but an aspect of the present which might be hiding from me. *The family is there*, he said, bringing me close to a strangely flawless circle of white spheres with one yellow among the four. It was extraordinary how perfectly the square had formed, a one in a million shot, I thought. One sphere for each member of the family, Uriah said. *But why is one a different color?* I asked him, and he frowned, visibly disturbed. *I don't understand that*, he said, *I've never seen that before. One of the family is not quite like the others.*

The sound of a truck going down the quiet road nearby shook him out of his reverie. Its headlights splashed across Uriah's little car, and I could see the silent silhouette of his wife sitting in the front seat, motionless.

He didn't seem to glean much else from the rolling of my glass, at least nothing he cared to speak about. Finally I pointed myself to the way a long line of black spheres had formed, a good eight or nine yards from us. Beyond the line lay just one outlier sphere, its color not quite primary,

but a blending of orange and red. *Does that mean anything?* I asked him. He inquired about whether there had been a death recently. A female.

You are here, he said, and pointed to a spot very close to my feet. My sphere was colorless and transparent, the only one of its kind. The deceased was that outlier beyond the black spheres. Not one separation between us, but two: I hadn't even noticed a second snaking line of the black ones, of roughly equal length, five feet shy of the first. *Why two borders*, I asked? And Uriah seemed not to want to tell me.

She has no chance to help you, he whispered. *She's gotten too far away. You won't even have any dreams of her, so don't ever expect them.*

And that was when I lost control of my fear and my anger, and asked who the hell he was to tell me such things, to appear out of nowhere with no knowledge or care for what he'd done to our parents or his siblings, who'd been traumatized as young children by his strange behavior. Where was the rational explanation for any of this?

And Uriah spread his hands again just as he had done at the cafeteria, palms up. That served as the maddening entirety of his reply.

The family would likely go away soon, he said, but when they did it would be a good thing. It would mean they sensed I was no longer in danger, and the thin strand of steel I had inside me, my curious strength, would be enough to carry me through the rest of my life. Words of comfort, of hope.

But on one very important point, he had gotten his facts terribly wrong. We left the spheres behind, as he told me we absolutely must, and left the playground.

There was so much to think about when I eventually climbed back into the front seat of my car that I found myself unable to return to the cabin, not that night. I couldn't take the thought of maybe seeing them, in the semi-dark, upon entering. So I stayed away. I drove up and down country roads, listening to the radio at full volume.

I checked into a motel room in Chambersburg at one a.m. But sleep didn't come. I took a hot shower, stared at my haggard face in the mirror, paced back and forth, sat outside in the cold, watching the lights on the highway. I timed my drive back so I would arrive at full daylight.

I entered the cabin, went into the kitchen, made myself a bowl of cereal and sat down at the table, almost falling asleep right there. Then I happened to look through the window set into the back door.

I went outside again without putting my jacket back on, wrapping my arms around myself against the cold. A gray dawn was spreading through the mountains.

The family had gathered at a spot on the edge of the property, just before the woods began. But there were only three of them. The man, wife, and little girl, their backs toward me. They stood before a patch where the cold ground had been disturbed—a long thin section dug out and then

filled back in again. A handmade grave. They had bowed their heads in mourning. The little boy's wheelchair was nowhere to be seen.

I watched them for as long as I could endure the cold, and then I turned away. I went inside, climbed the stairs to my bedroom, got under the covers, and slept for seven hours.

I awoke to the sound of rain drumming hard on the roof. I stayed in bed as long as I could before hunger drove me downstairs. It didn't seem right to be up and around when there had been a death in the family, one I didn't understand.

It wasn't until two days later that I went out onto the back of the property to the place where the grave had been dug. Now, of course, there was so sign of a seam in the earth, nothing at all.

There followed the longest duration of time I'd gone without seeing the family since I'd arrived at the cabin. Eight days. In that time I found myself going into town a lot, hoping to see Uriah again, but I never did. I spent more and more hours on the financial matters of the bookstore, figuring out ways to save it that I had missed back in the sweep of my regular life. The silence and the lonely hours had made me more productive and creative. I read as much as I had during my lonely adolescence. I began to write. I was beginning to feel not like a patient anymore, but a man named Gabriel Petrov who was capable of things. I was changing.

And then, on February 6, I looked out my bedroom window at 4 p.m. to see the man and wife standing over the grave of their daughter. The same place as before. For the first time the man was touching his wife, his hand on her back gently as she stood, a hand to her mouth. As I watched, she then kneeled beside the grave. And after a time the man left her there, walking away toward the side of the house and out of sight.

I stepped away, unable to look anymore. It was a half hour before I had the strength to approach the window again, fully expecting that scene to have concluded. Never before had I broken the spell and been able to return to it, to resume one of the visions.

But the woman was still there at the grave, alone, and now she was standing and looking up at my window, at me. Her hands were folded modestly in front of her. She was the one who dropped her gaze, and when she did, I turned and went to sit in the corner of my room for a long time afterward.

I drove to Waynesboro at half past seven. I didn't feel good calling Uriah from the cabin. I wanted to be alone when I did it. I sat in my car in the parking lot of a canoe rental place and dialed the number from the scrap of paper he'd given me when we last met. Thankfully he picked up, though our connection was poor; he was somewhere very far away.

I explained to him what had happened. He couldn't hide his confusion. On the one hand he believed this could simply be the family's way of fading from my life, which was a good thing. If I had sensed my healing had come such a long way, they *should* leave, of course they should.

But why this drama, I asked him, about the death of the children, the gravesites?

In reply Uriah was quiet for a moment, and then he said something which froze me. *Leave*, he said. *I told you they're your protectors, and I believe that, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they are, or ever were, at peace. Or even ... benign. Don't go back, ever.* But even of this he sounded uncertain.

At nine o'clock I made my decision to trust Uriah one more time and follow his advice. I didn't have to go back, I realized. What few things I had brought to the cabin were replaceable. I could return in the summer, in the light of day, with Treva or Christine or my unemployed friend Kirk. It was time to go back to my life. Let the drama play out without me, I thought, or let me be a partial witness, safe in the city among the things and the people I knew. The cabin had been good for me in a way I could never put into words, but things had ... changed. I didn't need to know the ending.

Worn out by overthinking, I pulled over at a diner outside of Thurmont. When the waiter came to ask me what I wanted to order, I had a terrible realization. I went through my pockets and my coat, again and again, apologizing to the waiter, and I soon realized I did not have my wallet. I'd left the cabin in such a state of confusion and paranoia that I had only taken my keys and gone. In my wallet was my cash, my credit cards, my ID. Everything I needed to exist even one night away. I didn't even have enough gas in the car to make it back to the city. I can't say that even during the dark days of my uncontrolled drinking did I leave my wallet behind anywhere.

So I went back after all. Weakening as I went, I dialed Uriah's number; maybe he would go with me. But a message kept telling me the number was not in operation, which I knew to be untrue. It was the kind of message you hear if someone's blocked you. But that couldn't be, I told myself, he wouldn't have done that, he wouldn't have.

I pulled the car up very close to the cabin; I figured I might as well go through the process of loading up my bags now. Once inside, I turned plenty of lights on and I went directly up to my bedroom and threw my clothes into my duffel bag, then performed a half-effort at making the bed. Downstairs in the kitchen I rinsed the plates and took some perishables from the refrigerator. I looked at the kitchen table for a time, the four chairs placed around it, the silly ostrich feather centerpiece. Once my father had told an off-color joke here and my mother had been horrified while I and my sister had cackled until tears rolled down our cheeks.

I heard a rattling from the living room; this was the east window, responding to the vibrations produced when the wind came through the woods just so. I kept a plaid wool sock next to the sill and wedged it into its usual spot to stop that maddening rattle. Something to be fixed someday. I turned away from it back to the kitchen, and almost screamed when I saw what was in the corner of the room.

The husband of the family was sitting in the thrift store chair my sister had bought for the cabin. He was slumped down in it, and though his eyes were open he wasn't awake. He stared eternally at the cabin's front door, as if he wanted to leave, but never would. One of his palms was face up, the other face down on the chair's armrests.

He had suffered a quite unnatural death. His face looked like it had aged thirty years overnight. The color of it was the worst part. The upper hemisphere of his face, above the nose, was a dark gray, while everything below was a sickly, patchy crimson, as if someone had tried to fill him

up with brackish blood starting with his feet but hadn't been able to go up all the way. A stone cup rested in his lap, having overturned.

There was a way to stay sane, to get out of there sane, and now I made an attempt to follow that course. I moved past the corpse and climbed back up the creaky stairs, then went down the hallway and into my bedroom again, concentrating on my breathing. I entered the bathroom and took my wallet off the sink where I'd left it and jammed it into my back pocket hard.

The cabinet above the sink was partially open. To my knowledge I had never even touched it in all my days at the cabin; I'd just spread my razors and toothpaste beside the basin.

I peered behind the cabinet door. There were three small shelves but only a single item was there, on the middle shelf. It was a very small brown bottle, made of glass. Corked. It bore a label so faded and frayed I had to squint to make out the hand-drawn symbol on it. A snake head with a protruding, forked tongue. The single word inked by hand above it was:

mürk

I reached out to touch it, but then I stopped. I didn't want that thing in my hand, even if it wasn't real.

I left the bathroom to see the woman standing at the back of my bedroom, mostly in shadow, having to bend ever so slightly at the waist because of the slope of the roof above her. Her eyes were wet and bright, her hands were clasped tightly in front of her. She opened her mouth for the first time, and she spoke a single sentence in a clear, soft voice heavy with an Estonian accent.

Now we can be together, she said.

I remember hearing far away something rushing through the woods, something large. Eventually all I could do was turn away and walk silently through the bedroom door out into the hallway. I stepped down the hall trying not to make my footsteps creak on the floorboards. I went down the stairs. The woman's dead husband was no longer in his chair.

For a moment I felt sure that when I opened the door to the cabin, I would be met with the vision of two children with gray and crimson faces, holding hands, the look in their eyes pleading with me to go back in time and save them from their mother. And when I opened the door of my car, I thought, *Now, now I will feel her hand on my shoulder. She has followed me out into the cold, she can't let me leave here.*

But I left freely. As I backed down the muddy driveway the headlights splashed across the cabin, and the only sign I'd ever been there was the wreath Treva had brought me and hung on the door to welcome visitors who had never crossed my threshold.

It was this past August when the cabin was finally cleaned out in preparation for the sale. As hard as it might be to believe, I had gotten engaged to a woman I'd met in an art gallery nine days after coming back from Tartown, and the bookstore was still hanging on, about to be aided,

no doubt, by the fact that a Hollywood studio intended to use it to shoot a scene for a crime movie filming in the city. I felt whole for the first time in years.

Christine got her daughter, who'd just gotten her real estate license, to drive out to the cabin to clean it and stage it. I got the call I had almost expected at noon on a Saturday. Christine said her daughter had gotten a sad feeling from the place, as if something terrible had happened there, and not so long ago. She'd always believed in precognition, psychic phenomena. It was concentrated especially in the master bedroom, where my parents had slept so long ago. *Maybe you have ghosts up there*, Christine said.

There had been just a little bit of poison left in that bottle, I knew. I think the master bedroom is where the woman probably ended her strange existence in this world so far removed from the one she had known in life. The bed was bigger in there, more welcoming, than the one in my room. Sometimes I sit in Patterson Park and wonder how long she had roamed the cabin alone, despairing, before she'd done it, how many days her poor sick heart had kept longing for me as she tried to deny the monster she had within her. How many solitary days and solitary nights she sat at the kitchen table with the east windowpane in the living room rattling and she not being able to stop it. And I wonder if she ever walked into the woods and knelt before the ruins of the blast furnace where I once thought the devil lived. It looked so much like a stone memorial, you see, a place to reflect upon, or even devise, the wreckage of a family who lived and died in the time long before I was born, before my name was Gabriel Petrov.

attic

My name is Dom Anders. This winter I called my estranged brother for the first time in a year to tell him our Aunt Nell had died. I really had just one question for him, which was *What do you want to do with her house?* Neither one of us had seen Aunt Nell for thirty-five years; we spent a combined total of five weeks there over two summers back when we were ten. She was our last surviving relative, and when she died we inherited her place in Premonton, Pennsylvania. According to a neighbor who'd called me when she died, it was pretty much a disaster, had been for years. So neither one of us really wanted to deal with cleaning it out, making repairs, listing it.

At one point during the conversation with my brother I said *You know, Gary, can you imagine the mess, that nasty old basement, and the attic...* And Gary said *Well, there was no attic, but I guess the basement would be horrible.* I corrected him on this, said *You don't remember the attic?* It was one of those where the door is built into the ceiling and there was a long stick with a hook you had to catch the latch with, and he said testily, *You're completely wrong, you're thinking of some other house, your memory's bad,* and he and I actually got into an argument about it. We always fought anyway, but neither one of us would admit the other was right and he wound up hanging up on me, like he sometimes did.

The attic thing gnawed at me. I called him a week later and I brought it up again, trying to be funny about it, but he reacted badly, he said *Look, I don't know what your game is trying to convince me of something that wasn't there, but if you bring this up again, you'll be dealing with that sewer of a house on your own.* You have to understand, my brother's had it very bad all his life. I told him I was worried that he was blocking it out for some reason, that maybe he should ask his therapist about it if he was still going. We had never gone up into the attic, but if he was actively denying the memory entirely, maybe something had happened up there that I didn't know about. Gary countered with, *No, don't be trying to solve me with some phantom abuse crap, what you're doing is letting a false memory let you play God with your poor screwed up brother, 'Oh if only he remembered what happened in the attic at weird Aunt Nell's, he could magically straighten out,' and big brother wouldn't feel so guilty! And before you start poking around in my brain, he said, did you ever figure out why you get physically sick at the sight of cotton candy?*

I didn't get a whole lot of sleep that night. I thought this was something that needed to be resolved. And worse, Gary did have me doubting my own memory. The image of an attic door in the ceiling was so vivid ... the thing was, I just couldn't recall Aunt Nell ever mentioning it or warning us away from it.

Nell. My mother had never talked about her much Nell had been kind of a spinster; she was on disability or something, or there was some small inheritance, I forget which. She was skinny as a rail, didn't have any friends that I recall. She wasn't much of a guardian. She'd let us roam until after dark, and of course Gary, the bad seed, sometimes came in even later, making up some lie about visiting the neighbor across the street. Nell would do things like ask us what our favorite food was but then she would make it every single night during our whole stay, spaghetti *every night*. She would make collages with us, no end to them, the three of us cutting pictures from old, old magazines from the turn of the century, not fun ones kids might like. When I showed one of the collages to my mother in the fall, she lost it because Nell had us cut up some really valuable magazines she was supposed to be selling off to support herself.

And there was this old chair in her living room that spun around, my brother and I were always spinning in it. And one time I woke up in the middle of the night and walked down the hall to the bathroom and I saw Aunt Nell spinning the chair around with her hand, faster and faster just like me and Gary did, but she wasn't sitting in it, she just spun it around.

In the end, Gary wouldn't meet me at the house; we both lived about two hours away but I was east and he was west. I doubted he even had a car at that point in his life. He'd run away when he was sixteen and he never came back, working at dead end jobs all over, landing in jail twice. He needed to help me out with the house if we were going to sell it, I made that clear, but he refused to even let me pick him up, and that just made me more convinced that something was up, something deeper than he knew with his conscious mind. So this very morning, eleven hours ago now, I drove to the rural outskirts of Premonton by myself.

I parked the car in the dirt driveway that I used to pretend was the endzone of an imaginary football field and looked at the house from outside for a while. Dumpy little thing, sadder than I ever remembered. The neighbors down the road had mowed the lawn for Nell as she got older, but someone had neglected to do it recently. I took the key I'd been sent out of my pocket and went in.

The place smelled like cats. There were no real personal knickknacks around, which I thought was kind of strange, and then I remembered that the place had always been like that. But there were books everywhere, in stacks and crammed into shelves awkwardly. Newspapers. Jigsaw puzzles. Maps. And very strangely, instruction manuals for all kinds of things, everything from vacuum cleaners to VCRs to tractors. The other things Nell had hoarded were scarves and gloves and mittens, winter things. How much of all this was Aunt Nell being her odd self and how much was the onset of dementia, I didn't know. The dust and cobwebs were pretty extreme. There were huge water stains on the ceiling, the floor. The spinning chair was still there, in the exact same place.

I went toward Aunt Nell's bedroom because I thought I heard something in there. Voices. It was only her little clock radio. For God knows how long, it had been very softly playing the local AM talk station, disconnected tiny voices speaking into dead Aunt Nell's bedroom with a bad painting of a cornfield on the wall and bags of clothes all around. I shut the thing off and then stepped out in the hallway again, remembering the real reason I had wanted to come there that day.

Looking up at the ceiling in the hallway, I saw nothing there but yellowing paint and cobwebs. It was here, I was sure, that the attic had been, its clear borders etched above us as we reluctantly played in this house as children. Confused, I walked around, trying to find the attic somewhere else. But there was nowhere else for it to be. And so my brother had been right.

I was walking through the kitchen toward the cellar when I heard the front door open again. Incredibly, it was Gary. He had taken the bus all the way to Premonton, and then walked three miles from the station, an act of self-sufficiency that would usually have been far beyond his limited ambition.

I was speechless. We didn't have any words of greeting for each other, distant as always. We seemed to both know what the other was thinking, and so the first thing he said to me was *It's not here, is it*. He looked terrible, he'd put on more weight over what used to be solid scary muscle, and he'd gotten another pointless skull tattoo on his neck to go with the one he'd gotten during his six-month sentence for assault in Ohio.

No, I said, *it's not here*. I opened the cellar door, flicked the light switch, and started down. Gary didn't follow me.

At first I was grateful that there was really nothing in the basement at all. Nell must have stopped going down there long ago; too dangerous for her to navigate the steps. But what remained on the cement floor was so strange that I would have rather had the clutter. There were five or six ... no, seven discolored men's suits lying stretched out on the floor, jackets and pants, arranged just so with accompanying gloves and shoes to create the effect of seven nonexistent men lying near each other facing the ceiling. And where each head would be was a magazine cutout of one, random men's faces cut from whatever Nell probably had lying around, frozen smiles from men in ads. These had been crudely fused to the cement floor with some kind of adhesive. A gallery of men who didn't exist, whose mismatched and moth-eaten clothes had been gotten from thrift stores, probably.

I looked above me. No attic. I wished I had never come here, never known the extent of poor Aunt Nell's dementia. I felt terrible for thinking about her so poorly. She had asked my mother if she could take care of us long ago, just for a couple of weeks during two summers, and my

mother had relented. Nell had been strange, but there was no call for me to be suspicious of her. I had just gotten the attic thing completely wrong.

I looked up from the bottom of the staircase, and Gary was just standing there, watching me, looking huge and intimidating. He had made a point not to come down. There was something he was afraid of, I knew it.

We poked around the house silently for a little while, thinking our own thoughts. We had a subdued discussion over the details of finding an agent to list the place, and someone to make repairs. While I took a longer look at things, he went off into the spare bedroom where we had slept as children to lie down for a while. I was pretty sure he was drunk.

Standing at the kitchen sink, washing my hands after running it over all those dusty surfaces, I looked through the window at the storm clouds rolling in, and I had a view of the little old house across the road, sitting alone on two acres.

The sight of it brought something back in a flood, all at once.

Without saying anything to my brother, I left the house, closing the door behind me very softly and leaving it open just a crack, and I crossed Aunt Nell's lawn. I checked for cars coming down Route 30—there were none, as usual—and I walked across the neighbor's lawn up to the front door. Every step I took, I felt more and more like a trespasser. I looked back over my shoulder to see if maybe Gary was watching me through a window, but no.

There were no cars in the driveway. I remembered that Mr. Zillett, who had lived here, seemed very old to me back then, and hadn't had one. I knocked on the door. There was no response to either my first or second efforts.

I walked around the back of the house. The property showed signs of having slowly become just as decrepit as Aunt Nell's. I knocked on the back door once, to no avail. And maybe I would have turned and gone back across the road if it hadn't started to rain just then. I turned the knob and the door opened freely. A lot of people out here never locked their doors.

I went into the house for just the second time in my life, calling out to whoever might be inside. Mr. Zillett had wanted us to come over whenever Aunt Nell drove the nine miles into town for groceries, but after one single time, I hadn't wanted to visit again that second summer. I had a trace memory of being left alone there, just for a little while. Gary and Mr. Zillett had walked down to the pond but I hadn't gone with them because ... because I was afraid of the bees down there. And for some reason, I had never crossed the road to the house again.

In the living room, old framed photos told me right away that this was still, in fact, Mr. Zillett's place, though he was nowhere to be seen. It had been kept very neatly inside, at least. His relatives must have been paying a service.

I went right into the hallway leading to the bedroom. I poked my head in there. There was nobody inside it, just a small unmade bed. A painting of Christ on the wall.

Turning around, I looked up, and there it was, the door in the ceiling. The attic.

The long pole that would catch the latch was in the corner of the kitchen beside the refrigerator. I looked out the window across the lawn at my aunt's house. The rain made it tough to see if the front door was still open the tiniest crack. I'd been gone for fifteen minutes. I found a small flashlight below the sink and stuck it in my back pocket.

When I stood again looking up at the attic, I felt suddenly dizzy and black spots danced in front of my eyes. I put a hand against the wall to keep from fading. I think my subconscious was trying to keep me from going up there. It was going to be bad. Thirty-five years of buried memories were pressing in on me, strangling me, and my brain was deciding whether it was better to try to shut me down than relive something I shouldn't.

The pole caught the latch and I pulled down on it. The long plank opened outwards in a billow of dust and unfolded in two segments. It wasn't a ladder leading up so much as a crude set of thin planks nailed horizontally onto a thick bed of pink insulation backed by plywood. My brother's words about the cotton candy thing rose in my head. It was true; since I was a kid I hadn't been able to taste the stuff, smell it, even look at it without feeling queasy. I knew immediately this was why. That part of the puzzle fell into place for me in an instant. The insulation on the ladder.

I started up, surprised at how difficult it was to keep a hold on the planks, though as a ten year old, it wouldn't have been hard at all. It would have been exciting.

The air up there was so thick and dry and heavy, I wondered how long I could even stay in that dark womb. I couldn't quite stand up straight. The flashlight was surprisingly strong. Judging by the film of dust, nothing up here had been touched in many, many years. Sealed and unsealed cardboard boxes, a bag of golf clubs, plastic planters, a sleeping bag, a neatly folded stack of blankets, several pairs of shoes, two lamps lying on their sides. The floor beneath me felt very thin, creaking loudly. More insulation lined the slanting walls of the roof.

I decided to just stand there for a time, staring down at a box containing four cans of paint, two opened and dried through, two still sealed, and waiting for a feeling to come. Trying to remember what I had been doing up here, way back then. Simple exploration, I'm sure, thrilling to the sense of danger and the forbidden. And then ... I had made a point of never returning to the house.

Two feet to my left I saw something on the floor that made me feel faint again. It was a dented, faded box that had at some point contained a set of porcelain dishes bought at Sears. The price tag was still partially there, from the sixties most likely.

I recognized the box right away. I had touched it long ago. The top was closed, but not sealed. I knelt down beside it, my right knee in the dust, shining the flashlight on the lid.

Well behind me, I heard the rain outside the house rise in volume for the briefest of moments. Someone had come in through the back door. There were light footsteps, eventually entering the hallway. I heard the ladder creak as someone applied their weight to the bottom of it, and started to come up.

A man's head and torso emerged through the floor, just a silhouette ten feet away, barely any light coming from below. My brother, his hands gripping the ladder and balancing awkwardly, spoke to me.

If you open that box, he said, I can't swear to you I won't hurt you.

He said: *Everyone does things when they're kids, to see what they ... feel like. You have no right to open that.*

There in the dark, we couldn't see each other's eyes. Without another word, Gary backed down the ladder, moving less carefully, the wood cracking beneath his weight. His footsteps moved back down the hallway. I could identify him by the sound of his walk alone, the way you can when you know someone for years.

I shut off the flashlight and waited for a time in the dark, the closed box from Sears beside my ankle. Reaching out to touch the lid, I think I may have stopped breathing altogether. As soon as my fingers brushed the seam, I knew what I was going to see in there. Certainly it hadn't been sitting in there for thirty-five years, undisturbed; what were the odds?

I opened the lid.

I waited almost a full half hour before I descended the ladder again. I carefully pushed it back up into place and latched it shut using the pole. I moved into the kitchen and was just about to return the pole to its place when I saw a gray cat crouching beside the oven. It was peering, head low, across the kitchen at the door that led down to the cellar, which I had left partly open. And I realized I had never actually heard my brother leave the house. There hadn't been the sound of a door opening and closing, or had there been? My memory, torturing me once again.

I watched the cat, which paid me no attention. It was focused on that crack, coiled in a stalking position as if sensing a threat. But then, it lost its focus all at once, as they do, and it scurried down the hallway where I had come from. I backed out of the kitchen, trying not to make a sound, and I walked through the living room quickly toward the front door.

I left the house and I crossed the road in the rain. My brother was nowhere in sight. Aunt Nell's house sat on its acre of dying grass, and nothing stirred within. No face behind the kitchen window, peering out. I looked to my left and right own the road, which curved out of sight in both directions. No sign of life.

I got into my car, and drove away in the opposite direction of where Gary might have walked. I didn't stop until two hours later, when I had reached my home, my wife, normality.

It's late, and dark, and it's still raining, and I am in my little home office off the living room, where I spend most of my time. The object is on the armrest of the easy chair I'm sitting in. I think Gary had simply hoped no one would ever find it, and then, slowly, circumstances had kept him away from the house for years. We'd never come back to Aunt Nell's after that last summer, and then there were the arrests, and poverty... the decades slipped by, and at some point maybe he'd stopped thinking about it. Until my phone call.

The thing beside me is not an old stash of drugs, or even the collar of some pet that encountered a disturbed ten-year-old boy after dark, and was never seen again. It's something so bad I had smothered it entirely as soon as I left that attic back in 1982. It's something so bad that I may

live the rest of my life sleeping lightly, frightened of a knock at the door in the middle of the night.

It's only partially my brother I'm afraid of, come to make sure I won't go to the police, no matter what it takes. I know it seems crazy, but I'm really afraid the people on my doorstep will be the now-elderly parents of a teenaged boy from Premonton who we barely knew that summer. *Give us that bag*, they might say, this withered paper bag beside me that probably once held a sandwich made for Gary by my Aunt Nell. *Show us what's inside, so we can finally know what happened to our son*. And I just hope that the field I'll bury it in tonight, after my wife is asleep, is so vast and overgrown that my mind will hide its location even deeper than it hid the truth of what my brother truly is.

The Cleaver

(We hear the sound of rain outside a quiet home, and newspaper pages being idly flipped.)

CAL

Did you hear that, Susanne? Did you hear that weird wet clicking from deep within my tortured mind?

SUSANNE *(absently)*

Do you want me to ask you what that was?

CAL

That was the sound of me dying of boredom, and it's only 9:22.

SUSANNE

Yeah, I don't know if I'm into hearing the I-hate-Sundays speech again.

CAL

And yet I feel you need to hear it, because it will cement our love.

SUSANNE

Well, there's good news, husband. I have an idea for us.

CAL

Oh, no. Wait ... I didn't mean I actually wanted to get off the sofa. There *is* Jets vs. Patriots at 4...

SUSANNE *(setting the paper before him)*

Look ... Mrs. Graham died.

CAL
Your 8th grade Mrs. Graham?

SUSANNE
Yeah.

CAL
Aw, that's too bad. *(reading)* Ninety-one years old.

SUSANNE
And the memorial service is at noon, we can walk there.

CAL
You really want to go, she was that important?

SUSANNE
I'm just kind of curious to see if anyone I know might come. But yeah, I owe it to her a little, she was the best.

CAL
Okay, tell you what: I'll go with you *if* it stops raining.

(A church bell tolls. Cal and Susanne are outdoors now, in the rain, which has gotten even heavier.)

MAN ON CHURCH STEPS
Hello there.

SUSANNE
Hi, I'm Susanne, I was one of Elaine's students.

MAN ON CHURCH STEPS
Oh, great, I'm her son John.

SUSANNE
Nice to meet you. This is my husband Cal.

CAL
Hi.

JOHN
Hello, thanks for coming. A few of her students are here already. Go right in.

(Later, inside the church, a priest addresses those in attendance.)

PRIEST

Looking around at a service like this one, I'm always amazed how people make such journeys to come and pay their respects, people who set aside their lives and their responsibilities to come back, even if only for an hour. I didn't know Elaine myself, but already I've heard stories of her service from folks who haven't been back to Morrissey in a decade, or two decades. It humbles me and it soothes me when I preside over a memorial and see the faces of those who didn't think of the miles and the hours; they thought only of a face and a voice.

What I'd like to do now is ask if anyone who hasn't spoken at the podium if you'd like to stand and simply say a few words in tribute to Elaine.

It doesn't have to be anything prepared.... Yes, ma'am, go ahead.

DIANE

Hi, I'd just like to say that I was personally inspired by Elaine's volunteer work at the Morrissey Food Bank. We worked there together for almost seven years. In all that time I don't think she ever missed a day, never complained when sometimes we got there and there was either too much to do, or not enough ... She was just such a warm, sweet person; she never spoke negatively, never let her illness slow her down until the very end. So ... to me she was a role model, I'll miss her very much.

PRIEST

Thank you. Would anyone else like to say a few words? It can be tough to compress so many feelings into a small speech, yes, I know ... yes, go right ahead.

SUSANNE

Hello, my name is Susanne. I had 8th grade French class with Mrs. Graham, who I guess I should call Elaine, but old habits make it tough ... I was in pretty bad shape in 8th grade, and I have to credit her with being that calming voice I needed at that time. I remember vividly having a little trouble with the work, and hearing my mother call up the stairs that Mrs. Graham was on the phone, and she talked to me for a half hour about an assignment, just wanting to make sure I was doing okay with it, but then, and I don't know how it happened, we just started talking about ... life, you know, and I swear we did that for another half hour before I had to go. I remember it was me who had to hang up, not her. And after that, there was just this warmth I felt from her, just as a good teacher concerned for a C student who was obviously going through a lot of emotional issues. So, that'll be my memory of Elaine, and I know I'll grow old with it. Thank you.

(Back outside, on the church steps.)

JOHN

Thanks for coming, that was lovely, what you said.

SUSANNE
Oh, absolutely.

CAL
Nice service, very nice.

JOHN
Would you both like to come to the memorial luncheon? We're going right there, to Ramparts on Main Street ... we have room; some of the distant family has to go back, and some couldn't make it. Not a big gathering, just 30 or so...

CAL
Oh... well...

SUSANNE
Sure, that'd be great.

JOHN
Terrific. You know how to get there?

SUSANNE
I'm pretty sure, we'll head right over.

JOHN
Okay, see you there.

(In the entrance to the restaurant.)

CAL
Here, they have an actual coat room here, gimme that ...

SUSANNE
You mad that I obligated us?

CAL
No, don't worry about it.

SUSANNE
Sorry, but I'm hungry and I heard even bad stuff here is good.

CAL: It's cool. I guess that's where we go, in the back room? Go grab us a seat away from that one aunt, the red-haired one, I think she's insane.

SUSANNE: I'm on it.

(The ambient sounds of the restaurant very slowly fade out.)

(A phone rings twice, and someone picks up.)

VOICE
Hello?

CAL
Hi ... Mr. Loring?

VOICE
Yeah.

CAL
I doubt you remember me, my name is Calvin Essex, we met about four years ago at the memorial luncheon for Elaine Graham?

LORING
Uhhh ... sorry, I'm not great with the memory.

CAL
That's okay. I've been making a few calls over the years, and I just recently got your info. I'm sure you probably remember something happened at the luncheon—something strange, kind of toward the end of it?

LORING
Ahhh.... yeah, I know what you're talking about.

CAL
Yeah, the reason I'm calling is to get your ... perspective, I guess, as much as you remember about that.

LORING
I really don't have much to offer, sorry. It's been a long time and I try to remember the service and the nice things that were said, not anything else.

CAL
I understand, believe me. But for my own memory, do you mind if we kind of review some little details?

LORING
What's the point?

CAL
More for my own peace of mind, I suppose.

LORING: Tell you what, I really just feel like letting it go.

CAL: All right. Do—

(But Loring has hung up on him.)

(After a pause, we hear another two rings, and someone else picks up the phone.)

VOICE
Hello?

CAL
Hi, Diane Fora? This is not a sales call, this is Calvin, I've been leaving some messages about the incident at the memorial service for Elaine Graham, in 2013...

DIANE
I don't know any Elaine Graham.

CAL
Well ... ah, no, you were there at the service, you actually spoke, you talked about her charity work, do you remember that?

FORA: Don't call me again.

(She hangs up.)

(We hear a door open.)

SUSANNE *(with no real enthusiasm)*
Hi.

CAL
Hi.

SUSANNE *(trying to be polite)*
What are you doing here?

CAL
I just wanted to get your opinion on something. Can I come in?

SUSANNE
Sure.

(Now inside Susanne's house.)

CAL
Is David around today?

SUSANNE

He's in Boston, a business thing.

CAL

The place looks good. What'd you two do for your anniversary?

SUSANNE

Went up to Provincetown, nothing crazy. I'm sorry, I meant to respond to that email about your mother's surgery.

CAL

No, that's fine. I was thinking more about the memorial luncheon.

SUSANNE

On that, I don't know if I have much of an opinion.

CAL

I tracked down the last couple of names I wanted to call. I dead-ended.

SUSANNE

Why did it take you so long to find them? Because the relatives didn't want you to, right? That doesn't tell you to stop?

CAL

Don't worry, there's no one left to talk to now. No one appropriate, anyway.

SUSANNE

Yeah, but you kept redefining who was "appropriate," didn't you?

CAL

I was hoping, since we haven't talked about it for a while, that you'd remembered something more about Mrs. Graham.

SUSANNE

No. I didn't.

CAL

So why do you think it is I'm the only one who can't let this go?

SUSANNE

Cal, bizarre things happen every day. Did you see that story about the kid who got drunk and drove off the road and killed his sister jogging?

CAL

Oh come on, that's not in the same category!

SUSANNE

Mrs. Graham was a sweet lady and a good teacher and that's all there is to the story, and the rest is something you should just pack down below your consciousness with all the other useless junk we collect that hurts to think about.

CAL

I think about your face when it happened, the expression, the total horror—

SUSANNE

Was it *really* that way? Or do you just remember it that way? It was *seven seconds*.

CAL (*removing something from his pocket*)

I have something here. This is the reason I started all over again, chasing this. I was cleaning out my old laptop a couple of months ago and I realized that the old backup histories of my phone were on there. There was a huge file backed up from the voice recorder app on that day. I'd been recording somehow since the midpoint of the actual memorial service, and it didn't stop until an hour after the luncheon.

SUSANNE

Unintentionally?

CAL

There's no reason I would have been recording the service. And if I had been, there's no reason for me to have arbitrarily stopped.

SUSANNE

So you got that moment?

CAL

Yes, I did. You want me to play it for you?

SUSANNE (*tiredly*)

Why?

CAL

To remind you that what happened is... God, it's beyond the imagination.

SUSANNE

That's exactly why you should let it go. You need to be as smart as everyone else there was. They're right to tell you off. I don't want you coming around here anymore with this.

CAL

I never thought you'd be one of the frightened ones. They're all such children, scared of the thump under the bed, so scared of the thump under the bed that they won't make the slightest effort to open their minds to something immense. I never thought that would be you too.

Well, congratulations, all of you. You've left me nowhere to go.

(Now we hear the recording Cal has referred to. It's faint and scratchy, lasts only about thirty seconds.)

At the memorial luncheon, we can hear Cal talking to someone next to him about some movie they've both seen. There are sounds of other conversations going on in the background.

Suddenly, the table begins to shake, and there's the sound of one or two objects falling onto the floor. People stop talking. There's a gasp as a plate shatters, and then another one. More objects seem to be thrown about, and Cal tells someone to "Get down, get down!" A woman screams in the background, and we hear a repeated slamming as of a hand on a table. Glasses shake, and then we hear a large piece of furniture dragged across the floor. When it's all over, those in attendance try to compose themselves.)

(Once again, a ringing phone. Someone picks up.)

CAL *(waking up, groggy)*
Hello?

GILLIAN
Hello. Is this Calvin Essex?

CAL
Yeah.

GILLIAN
My name is Gillian West. You don't know me, but I have information about Elaine Graham.

CAL
Okay... ah, it's really late. Can I ask you, are you related to her?

GILLIAN
No, but I know you've been looking for information about her. I saw a post you put up online.

CAL
How did you know it was me?

GILLIAN
I'm a pretty good researcher myself. Would you like to come talk about her?

CAL
Ah ... I don't know, is there something I need to know? I haven't really pursued this for two years now.

GILLIAN
You'll want to hear this. I was one of the servers at the restaurant when the dishes started flying and the tables started moving.

CAL

The server...? I already talked to, ah... Helen. She was the one in the dining room at the time.

GILLIAN

I was in the kitchen, I was working the main dining room. I saw things. And then I got curious myself. I'm in Eastham if you want to talk. Where Mrs. Graham is buried.

CAL

Now? I was just getting into bed—

GILLIAN

Yes.

CAL: Look, it's been ... six years now since the luncheon. I'm trying to get off this.

GILLIAN

You won't want to when we talk.

(A door opens.)

GILLIAN

Hello.

CAL

Hi. Gillian?

GILLIAN

Yes. Come in.

CAL *(hanging up his jacket)*

You didn't mention how the dirt road splits, I was about to turn around, it got so bumpy ...

GILLIAN

Sorry. I like to be away from people. Come into the living room.

I made you some tea. It's good, it's got herbs for protection.

CAL

What kind of protection?

GILLIAN

From wind spirits, stone spirits.

CAL *(skeptically)*

Uh uh. It's really dark, can we have some more light?

GILLIAN

Okay. *(she turns a lamp on)* Is that good?

CAL

Better ...

GILLIAN

Here, let me pour. It tastes like raspberry. That's the buckthorn root.

CAL

Thanks. I'm sure you understand, I looked you up online. Your name sounded familiar, and I came across the facts of your trial. I don't know if I want to ask the questions I have.

GILLIAN

First, I should tell you I'm a practicing witch. I obey the three-fold law.

CAL

All right...

GILLIAN

I can tell you right now that there's nothing about Mrs. Graham that would have caused her spirit to lash out like that at the restaurant. From what I've found she's just like people say: a sweet old lady.

CAL

So ... where does that leave us?

GILLIAN

What do you know about other verified incidents like that one?

CAL

There haven't been any that I completely believe. They could have all been exaggerated, or faked. The Loch Allen incident, the Amtrak 109 tape ... you've seen the video of those I assume...

GILLIAN

Of course.

CAL

Even those have their doubters. This is the only one I believe, because I was *there*. I still remember looking out the window just before it happened, I was looking at some people across the street closing up their yard sale. Someone was talking about a movie they'd just seen. I *felt* that table shake; I *saw* Diane Fora hit in the eye with a fork that flew up into her face; my ex-wife was hit in the throat with a plate. The clock behind the person I was sitting next to fell off the wall and some *force* kicked it right out of the room, fifteen feet...

GILLIAN

Do you know what a cleaver is?

CAL

Do you mean the knife, the kitchen tool—

GILLIAN

No. The pathways between our world and the world of the dead aren't only for those who have just died. They can be entered by those who weren't originally willing to go, but exit to the other side is denied to them if they possess true evil. They can latch on to a pure soul and travel with it through those halls in the hopes of reaching a better destination, but when they come up against the light, and realize they can't get through, while the pure soul can ... they became angry. Savage. And they're flung back. Waiting centuries for another chance, to sense another pulse in the darkness.

CAL

What are you saying?

GILLIAN

It wasn't sweet old Mrs. Graham that caused that chaos. It was a cleaver.

CAL

Do you know anything about it?

GILLIAN

Only that it was someone long dead, probably a distant relative. I looked into her family history. Eight generations ago there was a man named Harold L. Graham, he's buried in Provincetown. Tried for murder. He went free.

CAL

Where is this cleaver belief coming from?

GILLIAN

I'm going to prove it to you tonight. Let's visit her grave.

CAL

Why?

GILLIAN

It's written there, on the back of her headstone. Not in a way just anyone can see. But *I* can. I'll show you. We'll go the back way so we won't be seen.

(A long, long pause as Cal considers it.)

CAL

All right.

(We hear the sounds of walking through the woods: wind, footsteps through leaves. We hear Cal's labored breathing.)

CAL

Hey, can you slow down??

(No response. He walks on, quickening his step.)

(The sounds change a bit, suggesting a different location, but we still hear footsteps in the woods.)

CAL

Why are we stopped?

GILLIAN

Listen.

(Silence.)

CAL

I don't hear anything.

GILLIAN: Sometimes Joro-Gumo calls out right around this spot. The moon creates a pool in the clearing when it's clear. But she would never hurt *me*.

Are *you* afraid?

(Cal muses upon this, becoming just that.)

CAL

Who is that, who's Joro-Gumo?

GILLIAN

Let's go.

(Their footsteps resume.)

(Later. The footsteps are slower, uncertain.)

CAL *(frightened now)*

Gillian? Where'd you go?

(No answer. He can only walk on.)

(We next hear Cal completely out of breath, very frustrated. No more leaves scrape across the ground; they've reached a wide open space.)

CAL

I lost you entirely, didn't you hear me calling out?

GILLIAN

Here we are. Come on.

(They walk a little further. Cal takes in his surroundings.)

CAL

This is not her grave. This is not that Elaine Graham.

GILLIAN

That's not true...

CAL

I *know* it. Our Elaine Graham is buried all the way on the other side of the hill. See here? Her husband wasn't Charles. It was Kenneth.

GILLIAN

There's ... something you don't know. Wait here.

(We hear her move away. The wind rises. Cal remains, chilled to the bone, confused.)

And then slowly, all sound fades.)

CAL

And I waited, and I waited for her to come back. And I eventually walked to Elaine Graham's real grave, and I looked at the headstone. Nothing different about it. And an hour later I knocked on the woman's door, this Gillian, and she didn't answer. I went in and I went through the house, calling her name.

She was inside her bedroom, she was lying there face up. She was naked. She had rubber tubing around her arm, she was completely unconscious.

I left her there. I felt so hateful.

DOCTOR

And you never heard from her again?

CAL

No.

DOCTOR

I wouldn't want to make an assessment of her, but—

CAL

She was psychotic.

DOCTOR

It can't really hurt you know to think that. Do you finally feel... what's the word I'm looking for... purified?

CAL

Yes. Yesterday I finally deleted the recording, and I called Susanne and I confessed to her that I'd staged it sometime after our divorce. It wasn't real. And I told her I'd only done it because I

was trying to re-create the moment before people stopped believing it had ever even happened. But she knew the truth. She knew I was just so desperate for life to be more than what we see that I became corrupt. The recording's gone, and I never want to think about any of it, or talk about any of it, again.

DOCTOR

That's good. I want you to mark that down as another success.

CAL *(with a bitter laugh)*

I wish just once you'd break the therapist role and talk to me about it as a tortured cynic like me.

DOCTOR

OK, here's the thing ... even if you *had* gotten an explanation, a supernatural explanation, and you suddenly knew in your heart, without a shadow of a doubt, that a ghost had really caused that incident to happen ... where would you be? How could you live your life any differently? Knowing that there's a life after death, or that there are ghosts ... without knowing even more, like whether they're good or malevolent, or they're happy or tortured, and why... I ask you, when it comes to how we live day to day... so *what?*

(Coffeehouse sounds.)

MAN

Excuse me. Are you Calvin Essex?

CAL *(audibly older)*

Yes. Do I know you? ... Oh wait, I...

MAN: I doubt you do. You haven't seen me for thirty-two years. My name is Joseph Walls, I was a priest. I presided over a memorial service you attended. I've been looking for you for a long time.

CAL *(fearful)*

Why?

WALLS

Ever since I heard what happened at the luncheon afterwards, I've been curious. I've been asking questions, doing research. And now I know things. I know *why* it happened.

This is my phone number. Will you call me tonight? And maybe we can speak at the church.

Goodbye.

(The restaurant sounds slowly fade out.)

thresholds

My name is John Pellegrine. I can try to describe my malady to you, but really, there's only one person who can truly understand, and that's Mandy. It has to do with doors. Let's say, for example, you come home at night, and you step up to your front door under the weak porchlight, maybe the sound of crickets and wind all around, and you put the key in the lock and turn it. You've been gone for hours. It's dark. At that moment, how can anyone cross that threshold without fear? Any number of things can be waiting just inside that door, in the shadows.

For me, at the age of eight, it was Miss D, my babysitter, who had died of a drug overdose. My foster mother had dropped me off at Miss D's house and said, *Go on, she's waiting for you, I'll be back at ten.* I pushed the front door open, called out, got no answer, and went deeper in.

They told me I found her in the tub. My memories of that were totally blacked out, thank god, by a forgiving brain. But that's just one of the *many* things that can be waiting for us at that moment, that threshold moment.

At sixteen, it was something far worse. I was living with a different foster mother in Tom's River by then. Oh, she was hard. Slowly she was driving her other foster son, my foster brother, crazy. His name was Scott. Even at twenty-two, Scott couldn't escape her harshness. He had a very irregular children's show on public access TV, *Bruce Caboose* it was called. He and I never talked much. He would spend the time he wasn't working at a toy store avoiding our foster mom and writing the scripts for his shows in an upstairs room. I never watched them. Nobody did, really.

One night I came back from studying at the library and I knew something was wrong the second I put the key in the lock. I pushed the front door open real slow. All the lights were out. When I turned them on, life took another great step into the surreal, although the two hours before and after I discovered the body were again blessedly erased from my mind, just like with Miss D. They found me collapsed on the street after screaming myself into unconsciousness. You know the scariest thing about what Scott did, what he did to our foster mom? Scariest even than killing her with an axe. And maybe this is just urban legend, because I sure as hell didn't look any deeper into it after I testified at the trial and ran away to Edison. They say he was telling everyone what he was planning to do right there on his skeezy children's show. None of the tapes exist anymore, they were all confiscated. Supposedly there's a couple of clips on YouTube, but yeah, from the stories he told to the kids, to the puppets he sewed by hand, to the weird allusions he made to his life at home, Scott was broadcasting at some point near the end his intention to murder her.

So you can understand how my nightmares started and then intensified over the years. After a couple of bad reactions to anti-depressants, and getting nowhere with expensive cognitive processing therapy, nothing seemed like it would ever truly help until I simply started going to a free group in Highland Park that talked about their troubles, sleep troubles of all kinds. That's where I met Mandy. Her nightmares were actually more extreme than even mine. Ours happened at about the same rate, about twice a week, but sometimes she woke up screaming and thrashing around. That only happened to me once every few months.

It was really kind of amazing, us coming together like that, a bookstore clerk and a waitress at a chain diner, no money between us, both tortured by nightmares. It was just responding to a public post online, and we went to the meetings, and we made friends there, and she and I began going out.

On our second date we played mini-golf and drank sodas at the snack bar just after dark, and we got a little more into our issues, stuff we only wanted to talk about with each other. It was true, I left the door to my apartment ajar sometimes when I was out, mostly on nights I wouldn't be getting home from work till late. Only twice had anything been stolen. It felt like a small price to pay to not tremble and shake and have trouble breathing when I put the key in the lock. And that came and went by the way; I never knew when or why it would flare up. Sometimes I'd be fine. The nightmares have always stayed consistent, though.

I can't even begin to describe the range of awful imagery I've faced in my sleep. I told Mandy I'd always been convinced there was going to be a *third* surprise behind a locked door in my life, because bad things come in threes, right? I couldn't ever shake that belief.

I took a little chance with Mandy that night of our second date and asked her why she'd never talked in the group about what first caused her nightmares. Well, she said, it was because she didn't trust people not to judge her, or maybe even laugh at her. I knew then that she really, really liked me because she brought me into her confidence about it.

One Halloween night, when she was six years old, Mandy's stepfather had sat with her and put on a marathon of horror movies. No trick or treating for her that year, the weather was terrible, cold and rainy. She'd never seen a horror movie before. Starting at four o'clock there was the Wolfman, then Frankenstein, then the Mummy, then finally Dracula, all the old black and white classics. Mandy had been scared to tell her stepfather how terrified she was for more than six straight hours, but also fascinated. He didn't seem to think they should do anything else but sit there and watch, watch, watch. By the time Mandy went to bed, the first nightmares were likely already forming in her mind, but they didn't actually start until a couple of years later.

Now, you or I or millions of other people might see those old flicks as harmless, but for whatever reason, those images were translated into Mandy's mind as something much more disturbing. *You have to think of my nightmares*, she told me that night, *like you're watching real found footage of these monsters attacking and killing people. That's what it's like for me.* I had to imagine standing on a dark street and watching a woman dragged into an alley by a half-man, half-wolf, and hear her shrieks as she struggled. I had to imagine a child laid out on a coroner's table under a bright white light, and see the horrible black and crimson marks on the child's neck from where a mummy strangled her when she came across him in the reeds behind her elementary school. I had to imagine what it might be like to see teeth actually puncture the skin of a nun who was deceived into letting Dracula into her tiny room in a tiny convent, the moonlight flooding in, and hear her terror and witness her physical agony, unable to move or speak. All these things happened in Mandy's nightmares, an endless stream of violent featurettes, always something different and ghastly, torturing her mind until the fear of going to sleep ruined her life. She even had one therapist suggest she write out violent monster scenarios to cleanse herself—yeah, right.

Some years after they first started to happen, the monsters themselves faded but were replaced by an awful shapeless black force forming from a kind of mist and blowing toward her on the

wind, as if it were the physical manifestation of all those movie monsters blended into one relentless entity that now wanted to kill her. She would run from it, she would fight back, she would point to it in her dreams and scream for the people around her to help her. No Halloween spook houses for Mandy on the big day every year, not ever.

We've made each other better, I think you should know that. The first night I stayed over at Mandy's place she had one of those episodes, and I calmed her down when she awoke, kicking away the blankets in terror. Just a week after that, it was my turn to wake up violently. Many times I saw Scott in my nightmares, chasing after our foster mom with the axe. In real life he had chased her out into the yard and then all the way back inside, she bleeding everywhere. In the realm of the nightmares, he hacked off a part of her in almost every room in the house and I screamed at him desperately to stop, *stop*.

When I was with Mandy, the door thing wasn't such a big deal for while. She helped me talk through it more and only one time in every six or seven did I lose my nerve before opening my apartment door and have to call her to drive over in her old jeep and open it with me, something I guess I'll always be a little ashamed of.

Me and Mandy, two bruised people suspicious of all the costly treatments we have available to us. We've been about the group, the really cool group that has made our life easier. I mean, I know we need to stop drinking so much and messing around with the drugs, and give the shrinks another hack at our subconscious and our bank accounts. She and I have talked about moving in together, talked about it pretty seriously, but you know, it's hard to figure out a bold move like that when you have two people who have multiple issues in life to work through. It's just hard.

The homeless ex-convict wakes up under the overpass on Plainfield Avenue when an SUV with a bad muffler rumbles high above him, the first car to cross over in almost a half hour. It's still nowhere near sunrise. He swears under his breath and rolls over on his mattress. He is startled to see a bulky, masculine shape lying just a few feet away. No one has intruded upon his place here under the overpass for months.

Whoever it is, his upper torso lifts off the cold cement in one long, creaky motion, arms hanging limp. His head turns with the awkward rhythm of a marionette's puppet. The homeless man says, This is my space, OK, why don't you leave me alone?

Without a sound, the intruder begins to crawl toward him. There's a smell like motor oil and a wet animal. The homeless man sees this person's face now in the dark. Weirdly green and puffy, it seems to have been stitched together and is about to split at the center seam. One eye is only half open.

The homeless man screams. Knees digging into the filthy mattress, his attacker partially raises himself and clumsily brings both fists up, touching them together high above his head, and thrusts downward with all his might. The force of this single blow breaks the skull and death is instantaneous.

Last night I drove back to my apartment from Stokes State Forest. Mandy and I had scraped together some money and gotten a nice cabin up there for the weekend, treated ourselves a little bit. The plan was to go out and do a little hiking, listen to music, cook out in the open air, just relax. She'd done two fifty-hour weeks at the restaurant back to back and really needed some kind of break. And yes, I left the apartment door ajar when I'd gone to pick her up. When I do this, I leave the lights on and the TV playing at a very low volume so no one thinks anything is seriously wrong. Nothing got taken.

I woke up this morning in a sitting position on my sofa. I must have been more exhausted from the late night drive home than I realized. I took a long shower and got into bed for real. I called out sick to work; I'd been scheduled to do the 1 to 9 shift. There was just no energy left in my body.

The thing is, my mind was very, very unsettled. I couldn't figure out why there was a massive gap in my memory. My images of the weekend simply stopped Saturday evening until the time I woke up on the sofa this morning.

Mandy and I had gotten to the cabin, gone for a long walk, made dinner and sat outside for a little while until it got too cold. We listened to an old radio drama she'd downloaded onto her phone, and we went to bed at about ten. And then.... there's just a blank space where Sunday should have been. It wasn't even certain just when we'd driven back. Strangely, I found her purse in my glove box. That's where she'd put it when we'd gotten out there. She never took it with her when we got back to Edison.

I called her to let her know first thing, but she wasn't answering her cell.

When the chemist regains consciousness, she is aware of being dragged slowly along the cold, cracked dirt floor of some enormous dim enclosure, face down. Yet she cannot move. Her limbs are useless. She can only endure the constant scraping of her skin on that unyielding surface. When her eyes can focus again, she sees thin streaks of blood as her cheeks are slowly shredded.

The dragging stops, then starts again, then stops for good. Now she hears someone moving above her and a faint moaning sound, barely human. Her sweater is hiked up, exposing the small of her back. A large, shaking hand touches her there. The fingers are wrapped in some kind of cloth. They press down clumsily, cruelly, then move up her back, under the sweater, toward her neck. These are the last few seconds of her life.

The third time Mandy and I spent the night in her apartment together—this was back in July—she told me she had been feeling and sleeping better when she did something that might seem ridiculous. She liked to have a knife, a big Bowie knife bought from a trail outfitters shop, beside her on the bedtable. She felt then she had at least a symbolic defense, that she wasn't lying down helpless against the force that emerged out of the dark more than once a week. I would soon

learn, of course, how bad the episodes could get. One time I woke up to Mandy screaming and stabbing the air with that knife, barely recognizing me for a good five seconds before she became calm. Another time, when I was having some insomnia, I had watched her as she half-rose from bed repeating one sentence over and over as tears streamed down her face. *I will carve your headstone, unbeliever*, she was saying, and had no idea why when I frantically woke her up. She told me only that a movie monster had come for her in her dream, a newer monster after years of not seeing them. This time it was Candyman, bringing death to the town we lived in.

Mandy hadn't been crazy about the idea of the cabin at first, she's not very outdoorsy. I picked her up Saturday morning to set off for Stokes State Forest. We ate pancakes and eggs at a Denny's in Byram and listened to Velvet Underground as we drove.

When I woke up on the sofa this morning, my shirt was sticking to my chest a little, and there was pain all throughout my skin there. At some point on our trip I had suffered some shallow wounds, not much more than scratches, except for one. I washed them in the shower. As I was drying off, someone from the diner where Mandy works left me a message asking if I knew where she was. She hadn't shown up for her shift.

Four hours ago, I decided I needed to drive back to the cabin. Just before I left the apartment, I realized something. Today is Halloween. I'd even bought a bunch of candy to hand out, but suddenly I wasn't going to be there. So I filled up two soup bowls with Mounds bars, mini-Twizzlers, and Smarties and wrote out a sign that said HELP YOURSELF in big, cheerful letters. Then I left, leaving the door ajar and the candy just inside it. All the lights stayed on too, of course.

The law student sits on the warped platform of the hiking shelter, watching the yellow embers of the lone fire in the common campsite slowly fade. It's been two hours now, and still no sign of the person who must have built the fire but then left before the student even arrived here to hunker down for the night, exhausted after doing sixteen miles since noon. Where could they have gone? No tent, no backpack, nothing. Just the fire, casting a smaller and smaller glow on the front rank of the undergrowth bordering the woods to the south.

It's almost eleven o'clock when the stranger returns and parts the shadows thirty yards away, stepping back into the campsite. But then he just... stands there. He seems to want to keep his face hidden in the dark. Finally the student calls out a nervous hello.

When a ranger passes through the next morning, he finds the law student's body in three different places. The upper torso lies beside the dead remains of the campfire. The legs, swarmed by flies, are on the platform of the shelter. The head, ravaged and earless on the left side, is found sitting beside the natural spring from which long-distance hikers draw their water. No one in law enforcement had ever seen a head just sitting up like that, balanced in the leaves like it was a pencil topper, the dulled, bloated eyes staring into the woods. In gnawing on the scalp, the wolf that did all this left many of its own hairs entwined in its victim's.

To get to the cabin tonight, I took 287 to 206 North to 521 North. By the time it got dark I was rolling down Struble Road past Lake Ashroe. No sign of Halloween decorations or festivities out here, no way. Too remote. It's authentic autumn out here, and if you want to be scared, you only have to walk under the moonlight along one of the many unlit, winding country roads that surround the place where the cabin sits.

The cabin was totally dark when I pulled up at 7:15, bumping along a dirt road for a few hundred yards as the surroundings got more and more wooded. The place has electric lights inside, but not outside. The lid of the cheap grill was sitting on the ground beside it. That's where I'd left it when we grilled some chicken early Saturday evening. For some reason I didn't ever clean the grill or replace the lid. That was a somewhat rude thing to do, knowing some stranger had likely rented the cabin for next weekend. We'd left the empty bottle of whiskey on the ground too.

I went up to the front door. I still had the key to the door with me. That was in violation of the rental terms; I was supposed to have turned that in to a small rental office in town when we left. But I never had, and I didn't remember having any thought of it.

I slid the key into the old lock. And I knew right away that I would never, ever be able to open that door.

So many horrifying things can be behind them, you know? So many things. Haven't you ever felt that when you've gotten home at night? Every time that door is opened in. How can anyone return to a dark house, a dark apartment? How can you *do* that?

One night just two weeks ago I came awake at four a.m., sweating and gasping for air. *What's wrong?* Mandy asked, soothing me. In the nightmare, I was lost on a vast, icy plain as daylight left a ghostly gray sky. And then a monster emerged from a crack in the ground and began to run toward me, snarling and whipping its head from side to side. A movie monster. That was something I'd never encountered before. One of the cave creatures from some flick called *The Descent*. Mandy held me close and pried something from my hand. It was the kitchen knife I sometimes used to slice steak when I made a stir fry. I'd taken to going to bed with it sitting on the night stand beside me. Mandy had suggested it. And it did make a difference, I thought at first. Just not much of one.

I'm back in the car now. I'm not going into the cabin. I can hear the sound the door will make if I push it open, inch by inch. I do have one hopeful thought: that after tonight, the problem of doors is solved forever, you see, because in prison, they open and close the doors for you.

What might happen, you should be wondering, what might happen if two people who suffer terrible nightmares spend so many nights together that random chance brings a scenario in which they encounter their dreaming horrors at the same time? Maybe one of them comes awake, flailing and out of control, screaming, while the other is torn from their own nightmare at their bedmate's eruption of panic, completely disoriented. For maybe three seconds, neither grasps reality clearly, and both reach for their own weapons of comfort.

In that state of temporary insanity, one of them perceives the moving shape in the darkness beside them to be a malevolent force intent on murder instead of love, and acts frantically in self-defense.

I have this strange certainty that I didn't stab Mandy as many times as she stabbed me. That was six times, all relatively shallow wounds except for one, the one that keeps delivering waves of pain into my upper body. But I think *my* blows were far deeper.

Peering through the dark, I can see the key sitting in the lock where I left it. Memories, in the form of vague, wispy images, are starting to come back now, little by little, brought on, I suppose, by my presence here, "at the scene," as the police would say.

Back in Edison, the children have taken all my candy by now, I hope. It would only be fitting if the very last trick or treater, maybe dressed as Jason Voorhees or Hannibal Lecter, decided to be nice and close my apartment door upon leaving.

A drunk man in a Pennywise the Clown t-shirt, holding a can of Red Bull and telling his girlfriend to get off the phone already. Two little girls dressed as characters from the Goosebumps movies, pointing toward a glow-in-the-dark scarecrow and trying to get their mother's attention, to no avail. A couple in their early sixties who have come here to recapture a little of their youth, but wind up a little disturbed by the long lines and just how loud everything is.

A tall man standing beside an oversized tractor at the edge of the cornfield watches them all as the last groups of the night leave the haunted house and trail and hayride and make their way back to their cars, picking up their pace when the rain starts. Finally one little boy passing by, no more than five years old, sees the tall man and yells out "Dracula!", but the boy's father only scoops him up in his arms, mildly irritated. It's been a long night of such shouting.

Soon the tall man is utterly alone. I will carve your headstone, unbeliever, he whispers to himself, not knowing why. It is a curious phrase that entered his head from somewhere else, somewhere unknown. But he likes the sound of it. The rain clouds continue to gather, and he turns to head toward the lights of Edison.

vacancy

(We hear the narrator, Bruce Kosh, speaking onto a tape, outdoors in a windy, abandoned industrial area.)

KOSH: All right, it's 10:20 a.m., June 8. I'm standing just outside this... ah, I don't know what you'd call it, this huge container thing. And I just heard, I swear to Christ, it was a violin, a violin being played somewhere far away. I couldn't get the recorder on in time, so I'm just gonna, ah, just wait here for a while, and see if that happens again...

My name is Bruce Kosh. I'm a freelance writer and reporter. Before it was unofficially and cynically renamed Echotown, the place I want to tell you about was called Rarity Computing West, one of the most expansive tech campuses in North America, conceived and paid for by the Phan Brothers, Nhung and P.L., the Vietnamese dynamos who had been bringing the world's fastest laptop processors and cloud storage machinery to global business year after year. They bought 12,000 empty acres on the east side of Charleston, South Carolina, and went constructing a multi-use complex to rival the ones they'd already built in Germany and South Korea. Thousands of employees were going to work and even live there in the most modern office buildings and boutique apartments. There would be a self-contained shopping district, a streetcar system, even a full recreational park, all for the benefit of Rarity's highly trained white-collar tribe. It was going to dramatically alter the face of the area's economy. But the financial crisis of 2026 combined with a couple of very bad gambles on unproven tech brought everything to an ugly, skidding halt. The Phan Brothers frantically halted construction on the campus four days before Christmas, and I still remember how the stock market freaked out. About seventy percent of the brothers' wealth disappeared in six months.

Rarity Computing West was abandoned. It was such a massive property, with so much of it already half-developed, that finding some other wealthy concern to step in to repurpose the land was going to take years if the Phans didn't sell, and ever optimistic, they refused to entertain offers. And so, block upon block upon block of gaunt, skeletal structures remained near the banks of the Cooper River north of the Septima Clark Parkway. Seven temporary operations centers were emptied out and stripped. Even a couple of payloaders were just left to rot amongst all that concrete, steel, dirt, iron, and rubble. The three crumbling parking lots beside an old minor league baseball stadium that had been demolished to build the new Rarity U.S. corporate offices were left with long ragged tears in them, creating gullies two feet deep, as if the claws of some massive angry animal had come down from the sky.

It was spooky from day one, people said, and from having seen videos and photos of the place long before I ever went there to write an article about it, I can attest. Building after building, their growth thwarted in mid-bloom, no windows yet installed in most of them, no sides on most of them, insulation and loose boards knocked around in the wind, mounds of debris twenty feet high blocking entire blocks. And all of it completely silent.

The Charleston police had a problem on their hands. The area surrounding RC West was not especially crime-ridden, but such an enormous expanse was bound to draw in some rather frightening elements. And so, at taxpayers' extra expense, the place had to be patrolled regularly after it became a desert. They noticed something strange by spring of 2027. There was no crime. There were no people. No vagrants, no homeless, no scavengers, no pranking teenagers creeping past the low cement barriers ringing the acreage. Only in summer would come the miles of chain-link fence and warning signs. There weren't even any Instagram-happy hipsters wanting to slap fancy filters on photos of the abandoned zone seen at sunrise. No one was coming into the place—not in the middle of the day, not in the middle of the night, to either cover open surfaces with graffiti or burn everything flammable in sight. There were zero calls for assistance, zero calls to report a fire or maybe some guy attacked by a junkie while unwisely walking his dog near the ruins of the so-called "shopping district." You would see the very occasional panoramic shot of RC West online, but news outlets all tended to use the same ones

in their stories on the downfall of the company. It was simply as if people were spooked to go in there.

My first interviews with the Charleston police seemed to confirm this was true. *Bad vibes* is the phrase I heard most often from the men and women in uniform who drove and walked through the area as summer became fall, and then winter, cloaking it in even deeper grays and browns. Around that time, the name Echotown sprang up online and across social media; no one was sure quite where it came from, but a field day was had with it. It seemed an especially cruel dig at the Phan Brothers' naked ambition, and there was no shortage of people delighting in the schadenfreude that came with their fast fade from public view after years of relentless appearances on magazine covers and TV: Nhung, the older one, brash and boastful, and P.L., the real intellect between them, modest on the surface but unable to stop himself from touting his own scientific and business acumen at the slightest provocation. The name Echotown—or sometimes even Stalingrad West—accompanied most references to them until the brothers essentially disappeared, mightily humbled and pursued by round after round of litigation even as they maintained just enough financial swagger to hold onto their dream property. By then, the darker stories had begun to make their rounds. The stories that really made Echotown what it is.

The first eerie tale I ever became aware of was almost prosaic in comparison to what would follow. It was nothing more than a post to an online forum about goings on in the nearby neighborhoods of Nomo and East Central. A patrolman working out of Romney Street Station wrote that while he was performing the typical nightly drive through Echotown's unnamed muddy lanes, he stopped his cruiser and rolled his window down upon hearing something unusual. It was eleven thirty p.m. He got out of the car and listened to a strange sequence of alternating sounds. From within the bleak shadows of a cadaverous building to his right, there would come the firm double-tap of a small iron object striking another one. After a pause, there would be a response from a building on his left: a sound like the plastic claws of a cheap lawn rake drawn slowly down or across a cement surface.

The patrolman trained his flashlight on each building in turn, poking the beam through the glassless windows, past dangling strips of mangled plastic sheeting. He saw nothing. A full minute would go by, and then the pattern would sound again. Two taps to his right... the elongated scratching to his left. Purposeful, directed. He took a few cautious steps into the dank, absolute darkness of one of the structures but his flashlight revealed nothing even when the pattern continued, with always just a little variance in the timing and pitch of the wordless conversation.

Mentioning the phenomenon to a colleague the next day, the patrolman noted that at long last, evidence of human presence inside Echotown had been found. When I finally found that patrolman for my article, he was quite credible.

Like I say, nothing overtly spooky in the tale. The following March, though, fifteen months after the end of construction, things got a little more strange.

I came across the story of a two-person crew that went on location in Echotown for WCIV-TV News. They'd set up a single wide shot of the low grim skyline as a living background for a report on the many local economic consequences of Rarity's badly botched dream. Moments before reporter Liza Kent began to speak to the camera, so the story went, the camera operator waved her off because of a distraction far in the background of the shot. It was because of those

alleged fifteen seconds of pre-roll video footage that I came to speak to the cameraman, Mike Ratzencast, who had since left the profession and was a partner in a marijuana dispensary when I met him. He claimed to remember the day well and told me he'd watched the footage before it was deleted. What had threatened to ruin the shot, he told me as we sipped whiskey on his porch, was a procession of four human figures far in the background, four elderly people hobbling slowly from point to point amidst the false city's aging remains. Each held low to their sides what looked like plastic shopping bags containing unknown items. They appeared and then disappeared behind the façade of one of the buildings. Ratzencast, stunned to see people in Echotown, had actually called out to them from a distance, but was unable to get their attention. He remembered one particular detail of those people more vividly than any other, and that was their appearance of great age. Granted, these people were a hundred yards away, but still it seemed to him they were at least in their eighties and couldn't possibly have any reason to be there. When it was clear they would not re-emerge from wherever they had gone, he and Liza Kent commenced their shot, wrapped it up in two takes for use on the evening's broadcast, and left. Unfortunately Ms. Kent herself had no reliable memory of the incident.

Time became more and more cruel to Echotown. Hurricane Claudette's brush with the region displaced much of the rubble, scattering the loose contents, shifting them around, sketching a slightly altered landscape but one that was just as melancholy. It also wiped out a full mile of the protective chain-link fence around the area. Echotown's second wet winter caused the subsidence and collapse of two of the buildings.

Then came PRESS HERE. Those words were spotted and photographed in four different places, words painted on random patches of brick, cement, and steel in uneasy letters a foot high. Each phrase sprouted a long arrow pointing to a simple black dot the size of a dinner plate. A most curious call to action. Almost amusing, until you actually walked up and placed your hand on one of the black dots. What happened then was first explained to me by a surveyor compiling a final report on Hurricane Claudette's flooding effects on Charleston's east side. She had entered Echotown with her nine year-old daughter, having no child care for her on that particular day. As she leaned against her SUV and made some notes on her iPad, her little girl had seen the words PRESS HERE at about chest height on a wall, and she obeyed the command. When she touched the black dot, a shrill, wavering, androgynous laugh erupted somewhere far away. But the owner of that voice did not reveal him or herself. The little girl touched it again. Again came the laugh, which the surveyor, Michelle Neal, described as slightly crazed and unhappy.

In writing my article I collected three different reports of this phenomenon spaced out by weeks; the other two were from a real estate insurance auditor and a heavily tattooed installation artist who had crept into Echotown to get ideas for a possible diorama based on the haunting landscapes created by its remains. In each case, no matter which one of the four "buttons" was "pressed," the result was that same instantaneous, somewhat ghastly laughter from afar. The installation artist tried to mimic it for me as we stood in his studio apartment in Mount Pleasant, frustrated that he couldn't accurately convey its plaintive properties. I was glad he stopped trying.

Were there people living somewhere in Echotown? That was the question, and if so, how could they have gone essentially unseen and undetected for so long? Where was the inevitable crime that should have come in their wake, the emergency calls for medical assistance, the chatter about them in the surrounding neighborhoods? When enough rumor had finally surfaced, Charleston County Social Services investigated, but found no evidence of possessions or unusual accumulations of trash, nor did they actually see anyone.

But they did find the doctor's office. There were two mammoth gray metal oblong storage containers set up near the railroad tracks, having offloaded their contents long ago. Eighty feet long, they were open on one end, and one of the investigators got curious about the total darkness in there. It took more than one high-powered flashlight to banish it.

On one interior wall, in thick white chalk, someone had worked up a tall, crude approximation of the Rod of Asclepius, which we know better as the snake-and-staff symbol representing the world of medicine. Before it, on the filthy floor, were some empty crates supporting a mismatched assembly of wooden planks that comprised a long table. Beside this, an upturned fifty-gallon drum supported an assortment of objects so profoundly rusted as to be utterly unfunctional: two scalpels, a forceps, a large retractor, several empty syringes, and oddest of all, some kind of machine the size of a clock radio. The glass dials were filmed over with mold. *That's a bipolar coagulator, my doctor told me when I showed him a photo of the room that I'd gone great lengths to uncover. It controls bleeding and charring in neurosurgery.* Draped across that primitive table was a very clean white sheet.

The beginning of year three came for Echotown with a January snowstorm, the strongest one in the area in twenty years. Those coffin-like storage containers became shrouded in drifts two feet high. But there was no one around to care. In February of 2029, a couple in West Ashley named Barrett received a phone call that their infant child had been kidnapped and that they were to leave fifty thousand dollars inside a building marked with a yellow X inside Echotown, a place referred to by that exact name in the ransom note. The Barretts went right to the police. Mr. Barrett, watched by three sharpshooters and a half dozen FBI agents, took the money in a duffel bag to the designated spot, the hollow building once designed to house Rarity Computing West's offices of human resources. Waiting for him in there on the unfinished second floor was Lloyd Boykin, age twenty, the sole author of the ransom note and the scheme itself. He was sitting crouched against a bare cement wall, and instead of accepting that bag full of marked bills, he asked Barrett to tell the police he was there, and that he wished to be arrested. The infant was beside him, safe and unharmed.

Lloyd Boykin, later revealed to have an extremely low IQ, told the police that upon entering Echotown that morning through one of the many troublesome gaps in the fencing, he had been approached and surrounded by people he did not know, and told by them that if he did not surrender the six-month old baby to its father immediately, his heart would be stopped. These people placed cold hands under his shirt and gripped the center of his chest and he knew, he absolutely knew, that this was something that could and would be done to him. *Describe them,* said the police.

They were children, he said. Boykin didn't want to say more until he'd had some sleep. But he never spoke of the encounter again on the record, and since it was immaterial to his confession, the matter was not pursued. He died only two weeks after his surrender, stabbed to death by a fellow inmate.

If you wanted to experience some of the phenomena I've just recounted but didn't have the ability or the courage to physically enter Echotown, there was one other option as of 2028. If you're familiar with video games, you may have heard of Cloud Kings Ultra, the most ambitious

and successful space exploration and conquest game ever released. The company which created it was obligated to contract with hundreds of independent coders to develop, expand, and maintain—in real time—the galaxy that hundreds of thousands of players explored. The game hadn't been on the market for very long when rare reports surfaced of a tiny handful of players coming across a very strange place deeply isolated on one of an untold number of stars available to them in the game for wandering. If your character was on the ground in the right place on the right star at just the right time, you could conceivably encounter a geographical feature not approved by the company responsible for the game. A startling simulation of Echotown could be explored on foot or by vehicle, complete with recent details generated through highly advanced GPS technology. This recreation seemed to be the dark joke of a rogue hacker. Every time this digital Echotown was discovered and reported, the unknown prankster simply moved its location to some other barren star through sly programming, exploiting security flaws in the game's conception and architecture. To this day there are only two videos online recorded by players as they guided their avatars through this creepy clone. The hacker or hackers had populated Echotown with randomly generated, faceless, silent people who could never be approached. The programming loophole was eventually closed, but the identity of its weirdly dedicated perpetrator was never discovered.

I finally came to Echotown on an oppressively hot, muggy day in June, parking my rental car outside a length of tilting fence on the west side. I had actually delayed my arrival until a day that I could be assured there would be no direct sunlight; I wanted my photographs to possess the air of mystery that the place deserved. Clouds effectively choked off all satisfying colors of the light on June 8th and left the area gray and dismal. Perfect for me. A member of the police department checked my credentials and unlocked a wire door cut into the fence, allowing me in. And then I was alone, needing only to take pictures and absorb the imagery for the final draft of my article for *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Echotown was as lonely and eerie as advertised. It hardly seemed possible that years after this monstrosity had been born, any of it should still be standing. I had been warned to walk only in the center of the muddy lanes that had never become streets for fear that rotting masonry or weather-torn girders might suddenly displace and descend, as had happened often in the past. The tallest building in Echotown had once topped out at eight stories high, three short of the architects' original goal, but that framework over the years had literally lost two stories to infirmity. The massive piles of dirt and debris had been worn down considerably, their contents withered by heat, cold, rain, and snow, sometimes simply washed away to other places. The deserts of cement that remained were extraordinarily warped and cracked and strangled by resilient grasses.

I did not expect, nor had I ever heard spoken of, the curious whistling that greeted me as I walked lane to lane, turning randomly this way and that, craning my head to look up at the forlorn battlements. What little wind there was drifted and curled through uncountable holes and cracks and crevices which would normally be closed by builders finishing their job. Here, the steps of a person walking alone were followed by that whistling sound that rose and fell in pitch but remained constant.

I saw with my own eyes the fading yellow X that Lloyd Boykin had spray-painted on the side of the HR building and which had never been expunged, and I came across one of the PRESS HERE directives scrawled on a free-standing wall that had never been joined with another. The drawn arrow that had once pointed to a black two-dimensional button now disappeared at its midpoint; the connecting brickwork had crumbled to the sidewalk some time ago, so there

would be no uncanny laugh in the distance to greet me. Twenty minutes later, I entered the long gray storage container that had enclosed the so-called “doctor’s office” discovered by social services. The Rod of Asclepius was still there, but the beam of my flashlight revealed that everything else was gone.

As soon as I exited the container I was greeted by a surprising sight. Two men were walking towards me, one of them raising his right arm in greeting. I felt reality completely displaced for a moment as I recognized their faces. It was Nhung and P.L. Phan, in the flesh. I’d seen their photos a million times. No PR agent beside them, no driver. Just the two of them, dressed not in flawlessly tailored Brioni suits but the kind of very unfashionable weekend clothes you’d expect to see on middle-aged men bowling alone somewhere. Nhung shook my hand first and asked in his impressive English if I was the journalist who had come to do a story on Echotown. They kept their ears to the ground, he said with a smile. P.L., the introverted one, shook my hand as well. Nhung was willing to answer any questions I might have, and they were happy to clear up any misconceptions about Rarity Computing West and reveal its future. Taken completely aback, I told them I’d have to come up with something, as my request for their comments for the article had been twice declined by one of their representatives the month before. Nhung nodded and waved the matter off. He said this was the first time they’d been onsite since the end of construction and might even have questions themselves.

The three of us walked beside a shallow seventy-five-yard-long ditch running east to west, the genesis of a pond to be filled as one of the last stages of Rarity Computing West’s completion. Nhung did most of the talking, with P.L., who tended to lag behind, interested in offering not much more than a little clarity in technical details from time to time. His English was not nearly as proficient as his older brother’s.

Nhung explained that while they couldn’t discuss the ongoing legal issues everyone in the tech world knew they were still ensnared in, they could tell me that within two years RC West would resume construction, albeit on a considerably smaller scale, to house a sizeable acreage of cloud servers and the maintenance staff required to operate them. I already knew about this deal from my research, and I also knew that most business experts had given the brothers almost no chance to make the project happen. They’d never been able to shake their debt load, and there was real talk of jail time for both of them if the German government’s case against them for fraud against a block of their original investors went forward. I played along with their talk though, with P.L. seeming to feel most comfortable when he could use expansive hand gestures to illustrate his vision for their new company. I took notes and nodded a lot. To me, they felt and looked now like two rumpled middle managers who were trying to sell me on their past accomplishments.

They seemed unperturbed by the somber atmosphere of Echotown as we walked in a lazy square around the steel skeletons, occasionally detouring around a mound of rubble or a small sinkhole caused by the unsettled weather. I eventually asked Nhung: How do you feel about what they call this place now? Unexpectedly, P.L. took over the talk then. *We worked as hard as we could for as long as we could*, he said. *We are very ashamed this happened, but we will atone.* That seemed an unusually candid phrase for him to use. *Is it true people live here?* he asked me. I told him that no one seemed to really know. *That would be a very sad thing*, P.L. said.

We three looked around us and were silent for a moment. Nhung hadn’t shaved for a while; he rubbed his chin and stared emptily at a high spiking rod jutting up from the top floor of one of the structures, and he said it reminded him of a steeple. Then he reached out to shake my hand

again; they both did, and said they hoped I would be fair but honest in my article, and reaffirmed that good things were ahead. *With a mind like this one has, it's tough not to be optimistic*, Nhung said, smiling and pointing to his brother. He said they were a little tired from walking around, as they'd been here for quite a while before they found me, and said goodbye.

Almost the very second they turned away from me to head north, where I assumed a car was waiting for them, there was a loud thud from behind me and to the left, so close I reflexively lifted my arms a few inches in self-defense before realizing I was in no danger. I started to walk hesitantly in the direction of the sound, then turned to look at the Phan brothers to see their reaction. But strangely, they just kept on walking, and in a moment had turned a corner and were out of sight.

Subsidence and collapse, I thought; this was a place of subsidence and collapse. I peered around a high flat stack of rusted steel girders and saw two bodies on the ground, just a few feet from each other. The bodies had fallen from a substantial height. The coroner was not able to determine which one of the Phan brothers' corpses was the first to slip out of the nooses someone had been tied around their necks and descend to the ground below, anywhere from two to eight hours after they'd been hung from a protruding girder on the sixth floor of the building intended for RC West's administrative staff. First, their killer had stabbed and burned them. The murders were committed by a mob-connected silent business partner worried about the brothers' testimony in their fraud case. He lured them to Echotown to discuss its future and a possible way out from under, and then...

I expect no one to believe the story of my encounter, and I never finished the article. If I did, I would end it by telling you that I don't believe any living person dwelled in Echotown for more than a moment, and that it is instead only an accidental sanctuary for ghosts.

This morning I read that the minimum security prison whose land borders Echotown to the south has been shut down: budget cuts as the economy limps on, unable to right itself. And so the living graveyard has essentially been extended by five thousand more acres of buildings with no occupants, no purpose, and no oversight. It's 2030 and Echotown is still there. They say that if you get close to the border fence on the west side at midnight, you can hear phantom geese squawking near that shallow seventy-five-yard-long ditch that was the genesis of a pond to be filled as one of the last stages of Rarity Computing West's completion. And I wonder if that is true.

(We hear the narrator again, speaking onto the tape once again in Echotown.)

KOSH: All right, it's been about ten minutes since I heard that violin playing somewhere. I don't know, maybe the place is just getting to me and I'm hearing things, I don't know. But I'm totally out of battery, so I gotta shut it down.

Jesus, there's two guys walking toward me...

(He waves and says Hi to these men, but then the tape ends.)

digs

(into an audio recorder)

Well... here I am in the apartment. It's about as bad as I figured it would be from the looks of the place from the sidewalk. I'm on the top floor, the fifth floor, and there's no elevator. The hallways are dark, that's the first thing the leasing guy apologized about... he's kind of a specimen, his name is Dennis. How do I describe him? Basically a more nervous, more insecure Clark Kent. He met me down in the lobby to sign the papers, he was wearing a plaid flannel shirt and these pants that were like something from a bin at an army surplus store. He says "awesome" a lot: *Oh, you put your social security number on the right line, awesome!* Let me see here... Strode Realty, never heard of them. So this is gonna be my first night in the city. I'm not gonna look for a job this week, I'm just gonna walk around the neighborhood and do some writing while I'm still kind of inspired. I'll go bring up some stuff from the van and see if there's a good diner in the neighborhood. I do like the sounds from outside the window already.

So this place has exactly one amenity, not counting free gas heat, and I'm enjoying that amenity right now. Dennis called me today, he forgot to tell me about this little perk. The first thing he said to me was *The smoke detector works? You tested it? Awesome!* But then he told me that on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, there is free garbage pickup, all I have to do is put my can outside my door, like so, and allegedly sometime after ten tonight some mysterious entity will come and take the bag away. Thank God too, because to go up and down the steps with trash and to have to go out back into the alley and hurl it over the lip of the nasty, graffiti-strewn dumpster, that's just not a scene I'd be into for too long. So we'll see if this works. Life at 3501 West Gates Street, it does not get any better.

Yeah, I can't sleep. Second night in a row. I'm still just disoriented. Just the traffic sounds alone, there's sirens every half hour, there's train tracks somewhere nearby, I don't even understand where, I walked around... and ah, I'm lonely. I mean, new guy in town who hates people anyway. I miss Laura.

It's almost four. So about five minutes ago I heard footsteps out in the hallway and some other kind of noise, and I'm guessing that this was the trash contractor, maybe they do an overnight shift, do a bunch of buildings in the area, let's see.... ah yes, the bag is gone, the trash can is here, so that's a thing.

Except... whoa.

Okay, this is interesting. Ahhhh... okay, let me think about this for a second.

All right, so I heard something thumping in the trash can after I pulled it in, so I opened it up, and now I am holding what was left inside it. It is a bible. I'm the one who put into the trash like eight hours ago. It's just this paperback I got at a dollar store a year ago, I figured OK, I want to be a writer, I should have a bible for reference just like a thesaurus or a world almanac, but I'm accumulating too much stuff so I'm gonna start throwing little things away, and this was one of them. I put it into the trash bag with the other garbage, and maybe some trash dude saw it kind of poking at the bag, maybe he could read the spine through it, and he thought a Bible isn't something that should be thrown away, maybe...?

All right, you passive aggressive freak, if it didn't occur to you to donate it or give it away, I'll try again Wednesday.

Well, today's been kind of a loss so far. It's been raining since the time I finished my cereal, so I haven't been out walking. I tried to write a little, but I got thinking about my money problems instead, and I wound doing some math at the bottom of the page where I'm supposed to be writing a short story, and the next thing I knew I was back trying to get through *The Silmarillion* for like the seventh time, just lying on my butt. So that's what I'm doing now, I'll call the cable company here in a bit so I can have the internet hooked up, but it's kind of nice to be without it, actually. It feels like I'm living in the turn of the century instead of 2018. This is as close as I'm gonna ever get to being Nathaniel Hawthorne or Jack London, probably, so I should enjoy it.

(There is a knock at the door.)

Whoa... I'd say that's a salesman or something, but they wouldn't be walking up five flights.

(Another knock.)

All right sure, let's see what happens...

Things just got very strange. That was some woman, she had kind of a sixties-style bob haircut, really out of date and not in a hipster way, just in a I-didn't-notice-the-calendar-had-changed-in-the-last-fifty-years kind of way. She was wearing a long winter coat, definitely overkill, it's like 45 outside. She said to me, *Is the alligator still for sale? The stuffed alligator?* That's what she said, no hello or anything, I just stood there like, Whaaaa? The look of disappointment on her face would have been comical if it hadn't been so sad. When I told her there was no alligator

for sale here, said she was sorry and then walked all the way down the corridor, to the far end, and she disappeared down the stairs. I could hear her shoes on them, *clomp clomp clomp*. I notice I keep thinking about it as a corridor and not a hallway because it's so dark and old in here. Everywhere in the building it's dark and old.

Wait a minute, wait a minute. I've been feeling weird since I sat back down, and I know why now. There *was* an alligator for sale. A stuffed alligator. But this was... when I was a kid, like nine years old, I wanted some money for a bike so I asked my mother if I could sell my giant stuffed alligator, it was bigger than I was, that was the novelty of it, and she took me through the process of putting an ad in the paper and then someone came by on a Saturday, I think it was the pastor at our church actually, and gave me like five dollars and that was it. That was twenty-four years ago now, and about a hundred fifty miles away, so... *that's* a weird coincidence.

(The narrator has pressed his recorder against his apartment door and is hearing things from the echoey corridor: trash cans being picked up and put down, and a man moving closer as he performs this task. He is muttering something under his breath, a single word again and again: Small, small, small, small, small...)

I don't know if those sounds got picked up, I was holding the recorder just inside the door to the apartment. That was the garbage person outside in the corridor, it's 3:25 in the morning. Now this apartment is an efficiency, and I could hear him from the middle of it, so I assume other people can too. Ah dammit, I forgot to throw the bible away, it's sitting there on the windowsill, judging me.

OK, I just got back from a walk, I went down to the old war cemetery a couple of miles away, great atmosphere down there, but my phone rang when I was there and I answered it and it was Dennis, he called to tell me that he was trying in the building again this year, a door decorating contest for Halloween. Twenty-dollar gift card to the winner on each floor. That was all he wanted to tell me, because I guess at 3501 West Gates Street, they don't put up flyers in the building like normal people, the property manager calls everyone personally! My God. Well, I may just participate if I can keep my decorating budget to like five bucks. Dennis, whoo.

Night again. Rain again. I'm having ramen for dinner again. I splurged and spent for the 99 cent packets, the spicy stuff imported from Japan. I wrote a little bit but... there's weirdness here in this building, there's something kind of indefinable, it's getting to me. I went down to check my mail and stretch my legs and what I'm doing is traversing each floor to take a look around. There's only six apartments on each floor, so thirty in all, maybe a couple in the basement. I never seem to pass anyone, I never hear music coming from behind the doors or anything. I've seen two people: one a really old Indian guy with really long hair who went past me carrying a laundry basket, and the other a really unhappy-looking dude in a thrift store business suit. But I noticed tonight that one of the residents has gone to the effort of putting something up on their door for the Halloween contest. Someone down on the fourth floor. It's not a poster they put up so much as a big color printout, like they'd had it made, and at first I wasn't sure what I was looking at but then, since like a lot of people I've wasted half my life watching horror movies, it came to me. It's a shot from *Night of the Living Dead*, there's a scene where the young blonde woman, Barbara, right, that's her name, she's alone in the farmhouse near the beginning and she goes up the stairs and she sees a corpse with most of its face gone, and one eye in the skull staring at her, and she freaks out. This big printout taped to the door on the fourth floor is the shot of that face in the dark, that corpse's face lying there at the top of the stairs. And I'm sorry, but this is way too disturbing for a Halloween contest. There's no caption, there's no context, there's no construction paper pumpkins dancing around it to kind of mitigate it, there's nothing like that.

It's noon on Tuesday. About three minutes ago, I went to the window just to see, ah, there's a cat in the window sometimes in a building across the alley, I just look out once in a while to see if it's there. Nice little black Siamese, big eyes. But I looked down, down near where the dumpster is. The alley is just wide enough for one car or a truck to drive down if it kind of squeezes along, and there was a car down there, idling, and there was someone standing beside it.

It was the woman who came to my door the other day, the alligator woman. She was looking right up at my window, I swear to God. She saw me. She just looked... I don't know, sad, and we kind of held eye contact, and then she turned and she got into the car, this big old light blue station wagon, and she kind of cruised slowly out of the alley. It was like she had been waiting for me to see her and wanted me to know how disappointed she was.

All right, let's just see here if the trash man did his job last night. I certainly heard him out there as my hopes of getting any real sleep slowly disappear.

Oh. OK, the bible is back again, bag's gone, but there's the bible. I was in a mood last night and a little drunk so I put it right on top of the bag to kind of get his goat...

Whoa, whoa, he wrote something on the back cover. YOU SHOULDN'T THROW THIS AWAY. All caps. No punctuation. Oh wow. Okay, well, now we have a war on our hands. This is exactly what I need in my life right now.

It's late, and I've been drinking again. Just beer, it's all I can afford at the moment. I actually started to head outside an hour ago but it got cold so I just traversed the floors of the building. Only one other person has thrown their lot into the Halloween door decorating contest. Someone on the second floor. They too decided to put up a still frame from a movie. A printout three feet high, taped to their door. Scotch tape.

There's a scene in *Misery* where Kathy Bates swings a mallet and shatters James Caan's foot as lies there in bed, just destroys it, and this still frame shows the exact moment when the mallet hits. The printing is kind of blurry because of the motion. That just makes it so much worse.

What have I moved into?

I just didn't feel like going anywhere today. I did finally go downstairs around one; my laundry crisis has gotten pretty intense, I had to do something about it, so I took the stairs all the way to the basement. It smelled like apples down there for some reason. I went into the laundry room, it's got like three washers and three dryers, some brand I've never heard of, and Dennis was in there. He was sitting on the windowsill, he had his knees drawn up to him, he was just sitting there looking out the window, looking forlorn, though all you can see from that window is a little bit of the sidewalk. He saw me and he was like *Awesome, you're gonna wash your clothes! Make sure you slide the coin tray in extra hard on the middle one!* I put my stuff in and I know that none of the other machines was going, so what he was doing down there I don't know. I just wanted to leave fast but he was asking me if I was settling in, if I liked the place, all that. I said... Well, ah god, what did I say, I said, *The vibe is a little different from I was expecting.* And he got kind of serious-looking and he said *Oh, I know we have a few tenants who try to one-up each other every year during the Halloween contest, I should make better rules, but Christmas is coming!* And then he didn't say anything after that, that was how he ended the sentence, as if I was supposed to understand the meaning of that. *Christmas is coming!* I said *Later on, Dennis,* and I left and he was gone when I went to put my stuff in the dryer.

I was walking back toward the stairs and a door opened down the hall, one of the basement apartments. A woman was going in. She had something in her hands. It was two halves of a stuffed animal, a big one, like five feet long. An alligator. It looked like she'd scavenged it from a dumpster or the side of the road or something, it had been ripped in two, stuffing was hanging out everywhere.

It was her. It was the woman. She lives here. When she went in, I saw something on the floor just inside the apartment, in the foyer part. It was *another* stuffed alligator. And then the door shut and she was gone. The one I had when I was a kid was named Barnabas.

The dryers are pretty good here. I like it when my clothes get that toasty, it only took like a dollar to get them that way.

It's one-fifteen, I came out to walk down the street and get a pack of cigarettes, I haven't smoked in like four years. There's something on the door of apartment 505, which is two doors down from me. It's a collage of images. The biggest one is about eleven by seventeen.

It's autopsy photographs. It's a... what's the word, it's a progression. They look pretty authentic. It's October 17th, still two weeks left to go till the end of the Halloween decorating contest.

All right. I'm not leaving this place until I dispose of a certain book. Before I left the apartment I ripped it down the spine, about six different places. So let's get it on.

(Night. We hear the sounds of the trash man in the corridor, picking up trash cans and putting them down again, moving ever closer to the mic, again mumbling one word under his breath: Small, small, small, small, small...

When he opens the lid of the can placed outside by the narrator, he stops cold. He then begins to make a strange combination of whining and crying sounds, saying, "No, no, no..." We hear the narrator whisper "Jesus..." into the mic from behind the door.

Then, after the trash man begins to openly weep, there is a loud thumping at the door as he lashes out with his fist. The narrator again whispers "Jesus!" yet makes no move.

Eventually the trash man is heard to turn away and stalk down the hall, slamming a big door behind him.)

* * * * *

(driving)

Okay, so, nineteen years ago, back when I did a lot of journaling and recording my thoughts and so forth because I wanted to be some kind of a writer, I lived for... I think less than a week at this building I'm coming up on now, 3501 West Gates. And I so wish I still had those recordings, I'd love to hear what I was like, because I was pretty messed up back then. I was drinking a lot, I kind of overdramatized things that happened to me... I mean it's all true, it's just that I overreacted to things because I was a drama addict, that's part of the reason I had to stop putting my thoughts on audio. But I've never forgotten that week, I remember it pretty vividly. And the last sight I ever had of this place... is this the right turn? Yes. The last sight I ever had was... I mean, I freaked out and I moved my stuff out before dawn one day, I just put it in the van and I even left some of it behind. And I remember I was pulling away from the curb and I looked back and in the rearview mirror I saw the property manager appear, just kind of pop out of the building, god knows what he was doing up or there that early, but he had that weird

habit of just appearing places, I forget his name... and I will never forget what he was yelling at the van as I drove away. He was running, his big weird feet clomping on the sidewalk, and he was yelling *I can explain! I can explaiiiiiinnn!* like *pleading*. And I've always just wondered, explain which part? Explain which part of what happened to me?

Anyway, yeah, here we are... and.... yeah, the place looks a little bit different. I mean, I'm sure the whole city has changed a lot in nineteen years, but let's check this out...

I'm inside the lobby here. So it looks like at some point they tried to rent the first floor out as offices. There's a signboard here, a bunch of stuff I never heard of. Gebney Insurance, some dentist... but everything's gone, everything's super musty, abandoned, I just walked right in.

This is it, door's wide open, 509, this is where I technically lived. Yeah, there's just debris and mold in all the hallways. It's pretty creepy, thank god it's noon.

I don't know that anyone I told the story to ever really believed me, that's what kills me. It was all just such a fever dream of strangeness.

Oh my god... the cat's still there. In the window across the alley. The Siamese. I guess that's possible..?

I swear, just standing here again, I feel—

(He is interrupted by a knock of the apartment door.)

A Convergence in Wintertime

(We hear the sounds of ocean waves roiling, with rising winds.

Then comes a strange, androgynous voice speaking low and without emotion, with long pauses between each sentence.)

THE VOICE

I am a sweeper of the dunes.

Someone is coming.

They must not.

I will prepare them for the sea.

(The sounds fade out.)

TOM

It was a Monday, a normal Monday, but around ten, Bree from Accounting came into my office and dropped off the month-end stuff. And my eyes went to a certain line and I said, 'Wait, Bree, what's this?' She said 'Oh, that's the payment to Magrand Publishing, it went through last week.' I said 'Wait, wait, the \$600,000 was supposed to be done in four quarters *throughout the year.*'

She checked her email there on her phone and she brought up the original issuing document I'd sent her. And I hadn't checked off the right disbursement box, I'd selected the wrong one. And what that meant was... that the CFO was in about six hours going to find out that the quarterly profits were about to be thrown off through the middle of the year, and that all the budgeting he'd done was going to be wrong when he presented it to the board.

Now we *owed* that \$600,000; it had to be paid, the company was not suddenly without money, but it was about projections and budgeting and the CFO was about to be made to look very stupid.

I got in the car, I drove home... I could feel the clock ticking in my mind, and I could feel my heart beating in my chest, trying to frantically figure out some way to undo this, some loophole.

My wife found me just lying on the sofa. She said 'What's wrong, your face is red and blotchy.' Something in my brain just... gave.

MONICA, TOM'S WIFE

He would talk about this daydream he had sometimes, this ambition, he would talk about it a couple of times a year... but the thing with Tom is, he never understood the difference between a dream that was *constructive* and something that was just an escape hatch from being a grownup.

But that was Tom, his dreams were like the ones you have when you're fourteen and reading *Call of the Wild*; they never adapted to the reality of an actual relationship, and bills, and a mortgage, and the stuff that has to be *navigated*.

TOM

I said, 'I don't expect you to support a daydream, I don't expect you to wait for me blindly while I discover myself---I'm just asking you, as a human being, to see when another human being has reached his moment of can't. I *can't*. This is not why my mother held me in her arms when I was sick or crying out to be warmed, so I could lie here forty years later on this Ikea sofa near our granite countertops with my hands shaking and my face red like my blood pressure is out of control, I *can't*. Full stop.' But she said, 'That's not how an adult approaches life.'

And this gulf opened up between us.

The sounds of the ocean begin to rise again, calmer this time, behind the dialogue.

TOM

My phone started to ring around three. Here came the messages. I managed to drive back to the lobby of the building... and I froze there, I couldn't physically get in the elevator. I drove to the mall and sent out my resignation from my phone. Eleven years I'd been there.

The ocean sounds cut out abruptly.

LYDIA PONARSKI

Chancellor County is kind of a strange area. Inland, there's a big, big belt of rural poverty that's really heartbreaking, that runs from Wisherland all the way to Tribune. And to the west of that, curving up the coast, you start to have real wealth, the summer tourists and the fancy folks who live right on Iona Beach. So it's only five miles from the poorest people in the state to the richest. And then, way to the west of the rich, there's the Braid, which is its own thing entirely.

TOM

January 19. It took two trips, so double the normal ride price, to get all my stuff to the shack. I thought in winter the sand wouldn't be so impossible for a four-wheel to get through, but the woman driving it had her problems. She was whipping the steering wheel all over the place and we bounced so high we nearly hit the ceiling. At one point I thought we were tipping over and I made some ridiculous gulping sound and she laughed.

I primed a fair amount of water as soon I got here, so with that plus the water I bought in Iona Beach, I think I have enough for a couple of weeks. It's weird, but the beach seems farther away than it did two years ago. Just an illusion because of the erosion or something, I think. I started to walk out there over the dunes but it's just too cold right now to make it enjoyable. I didn't even get within sight of the ocean before I turned back.

LYDIA

The soil in the Braid is so soft that nothing can be built. It's just the way the geology is. The only way to get there from these mansions ten miles down on Iona Beach is to either own a very good four-wheel drive or rent one—from me, preferably—and even then you need paddle tires. So what happened over the generations is that where the sand was firmer, the wealthy did their

thing, but to the west, in all those miles of nothing beside the coast road, there was no population at all, because who would want a summer house, or a shack more like, that was gonna little by little sink into it.

TOM

It was my uncle's house, he was a fifth grade teacher for forty years, and two years after he retired, he died never having lived there, in these two little rooms where he intended to grow old. He said to me—I think it was maybe three weeks before he died—he said 'Nothing kept me from it; I just took a little too much time. I just took my time.' And it really was unlivable, for a normal person, he'd gotten hustled bad. But it was where I needed to be. I wasn't a normal person anymore.

We hear only the wind now, no water.

TOM

January 22. The wood stove needs repairing, and probably fast. The mold will probably get into my lungs as some point. It doesn't matter. My body clock has already changed. When the sun goes down I go to sleep. I wake up at four and I trudge all the way to the shore, two rest breaks on the way, twenty minutes. Walking on the dunes is hard work. The wind finds you everywhere.

January 24. I read once that you need to befriend boredom, you need to let it sink into you and go where it goes. I only have about three hours of real energy during the day before the sameness of being here creeps into my bones, and the sounds become monotonous. I've started reading a history of the county the maritime museum put out fifty years ago. The Braid is mentioned specifically; I didn't realize its distant past was so filled with violence.

Midday is the hardest for me. Lying by the fire, that's when I think of all the people I know and have ever known, and I think of how they're part of the machine of the world still, every single one of them, making it go, and I am not. Then dusk comes, and the light coming in through the window is so peaceful I don't ever want to go back, or even stop thinking about the sadness of my life.

(The sounds of the wind cut out very suddenly.)

ANSON

I never really understood we were poor till my father started taking us for drives on the weekends, a year after we came to America. Till then I was so wrapped up in my own brain that anything was a toy, and whoever I was playing with was like the whole world. And everyone at school seemed kind of like me. But then my Dad got this job where he finally got hold of a car sometimes, when he did termite inspections. It was a company van, and there were these Saturdays when me and my Mom got in and he drove us out to Iona Beach 'cause sometimes no one needed the van on the weekends. And that was when I started to notice everything that we didn't have.

I don't think my Mom or Dad liked those trips. When we crossed over from Tribune they both got really quiet. We got reminded we didn't belong real quick. These condos we saw, and the boardwalk, and the shopping places where we could never really go, and the people who didn't seem anything like us.... this sort of alien world. It was like if we made too much noise, someone on the street would turn and we'd be found out.

TOM

January 26. I put my phone into a plastic bag today, and after dark, after dinner—ramen noodles on the oil stove—I went out and buried it in a dune. I hadn't turned it on for a few days and there wasn't much battery left, but I realized I needed a more profound break. First I arranged with Lydia, the woman with the four wheel, to come out automatically every Monday to drive me into town for food if I needed it.

Just as I was about to drop the phone into the hole I dug, the cell signal caught, and four or five messages scrolled onto the screen, and a different chime sounded for each app, and I never looked at a single one of them. Just threw that little glow into the hole and covered it up and looked up at the stars.

Walking back, I saw something a couple of hundred yards away. It was a very bright light somewhere among the dunes, a stationary yellow light. I figured it was a lantern. Which meant someone camping out probably, illegally. There was something so peaceful about it, but a little frightening too. The nature of the light seemed unreal somehow. I watched it for almost five minutes I think. I almost forgot how cold I was, and then it went out suddenly. All the way back to the shack, there was a red spot in my vision where it used to be.

ANSON

My friend Rennie and I would walk a couple miles to the library sometimes on summer vacation. He was kind of a troublemaker but as long as I told him we'd go to the Easymart at the gas station afterward, he'd go along. He liked the Choose Your Own Adventure books, that was all he wanted to look at. I never checked books out when I was with him. I'd wait until I went alone for that, 'cause I thought he'd make fun of me if he saw me checking out some of the books I thought I'd be into.

On the Rennie days I liked books showing war photos or satellite photos of just about anything. I liked puzzle books too, especially the ones where they showed you something and you had to figure out what you were looking at. One day I came across this book called *Professor Randy's Cure for Rainy Days*. On every page was some kind of trivia question or a mystery for your eyes, lots of real pictures and you had to think hard.

One picture I found had a sentence under it. It said you were looking at a sand dune where five thousand real dollars got hidden by a famous author, this guy James Del Norr. All anyone had to do was go to it and dig the money out. It was that simple. Figure out where this dune might be from the clues in the picture.

And that totally grabbed me. I looked at that picture a hundred times. This one dune with a bunch of scraggly grass all around it. The camera was looking down on it from about twenty feet. Somewhere in there were enough clues to figure out where it was. But it just seemed impossible to me.

I tracked down one of this guy's books and read it, and it was pretty good. It was crime stuff. His biography said he lived in Massachusetts, so I figured, Well, he probably hid the money up there in that place Cape Cod or something. And I just tried to forget about it.

But I read another one of his books and I looked him up on Wikipedia one day. There wasn't much there but it said he graduated from Upham Terrace High School in 1960. If it was the same Upham Terrace, that was only like thirty miles away from me.

TOM

There were other shacks, I knew, stretching west, one every half mile or so; I'd seen them before, but most of them were in even worse shape, and especially in wintertime, no one would be in them. But to keep from going crazy I hiked to a couple of them, and I even semi-broke into one, just because I could, I was so alone out there. I started to think maybe no one had lived in the Braid in modern times.

I started to fear for my sanity a little, because I'd gotten.... paranoid about being watched, I would come awake in the middle of the night and go to the window, thinking someone was there. It had kind of started when I buried my phone and then saw that mysterious light. I'd heard one too many ghost stories about the Braid, probably.

ANSON

I got busy trying to keep my grades up, but I would go back to the puzzle book once in a while, I couldn't let it go. And one day, out of nowhere, I just kind of saw the picture different than before. There was just a little bit of sun out when it was taken, and if you looked close enough, you could see there was a part of the dune that was in shadow. It even had a shape to it, like an outline. Something big was between the sun and the camera and the dune, you just had to look and look.

I asked the librarian, this real nice lady, if there were dunes anywhere near us. I'd never really seen them except on TV. I didn't know what the Braid was, and she told me all about it. I said I had a school project to draw a map. I asked her if there was a way to learn more about what the Braid was like, because my Dad couldn't take me out there. He didn't have his job anymore, and there was no other way.

TOM

January 30. I saw something really disturbing today. It was getting late, it was dusk, and I was doing a little wood-gathering and a little watching out for a bald eagle. I heard a bunch of gulls really going crazy at some spot off in the direction of the coast road. A mass of gulls, squawking, but I couldn't see them.

And over in that direction, far away, there was someone standing in the sand. Just standing, not doing anything. Looking at me. The only person I've seen out here since I got dropped off. He was wearing a long white raincoat; looked like one anyway. I got scared because his face was obscured. There was grass adhered to his face by string or wire or something wrapped around his head, grass sprouting around the wire, like he was trying to camouflage himself with dune grass. As soon as I got a really good look he turned and walked away. He struggled through the sand just like I do. He went behind a dune.

Was he lost? Is it him who camped out the other night? I went as quick as I could manage back to the shack and made myself some coffee and locked the door. I'll tell Lydia when she comes with the four-wheel to take me into town for groceries. I think this was the strangest thing I've ever seen.

ANSON

I started staying late at school and using the computer lab when I could. They had everything on the internet if you dug around enough. The school was on the county network so I could set up an account with the state surveyor's office. I set it up like the school itself had the account so it wouldn't be suspicious. There were topo maps of the entire Braid. That means "topography."

I started thinking about how the camera must have been on some kind of structure when the mystery picture was taken. It was up higher than any of the dunes, I was sure of it. There were no big buildings—there were miles and miles of dunes but no big buildings 'cause of how messed up the sand was.

I found this thing marked on a map that was built to be a place where they were gonna pump water to houses someday, it was closer to the beach than anything else. I found a picture of it even. It looked like half of a teeny old-fashioned train station almost. They never finished it 'cause a soil survey proved no real houses could ever be built out there. So it just went to rot.

When I saw that picture, I really thought I had it. There was a part of this pumphouse thing that was pointy, like this triangle poking up, and if you looked at the puzzle picture hard enough, the shadow kind of had that in it. It was just so hard to tell because the sand made the shadow all bulgey and stretched.

I thought maybe this author guy had faked out everyone but me. That shadow was *here*, not in Cape Cod or someplace.

I thought I had that money in my hands.

TOM

January 31. I've stopped hearing the low constant roar of the ocean from far away. It's inside my bones now, I guess. I went out and gathered more wood in case of bad weather. I saw a wind devil out my window. Swirls of sand joined up out of nowhere and whipped around like a tornado no taller than a man, and then they dispersed, like a ghost.

Tomorrow I'll walk all the way down to the old pumphouse. It'll be something new, something I've never seen. I'll go past the place where I saw that light the other night. I just don't want to encounter an unfriendly face.

(The sound of the wind has returned, rising, rising... then cutting out very sharply.)

EVA

Arthur was his name, funny name for a guy like that. He was living with me for about a month. At first I thought he was all right, even though my girlfriend told me some things about him. I figured I could handle myself, but he just kind of invited himself into the house. I could have gotten into a lot of trouble.

He said he had a job with a contractor, but he only worked like two days a week. He was like me, he just wanted to get high all the time. As long as he didn't get aggressive or anything, I didn't mind. I told him at some point I didn't even belong in the house, I said we were both squatting and we had to be careful, and *then* I thought he *would* lose it. That was a bad argument.

The thing is, he always had some stuff we could use. It just never ended with him. I never asked where he was getting it.

He talked weird sometimes, at night, when he was lying there. He did it when he was asleep but sometimes he'd be lying there smoking and he'd just say these words to the ceiling. He had it in for some people; that was all I could figure out. But I couldn't do anything about it. I didn't know him that well.

One time I was pretending I was asleep but I was listening to him. He was smoking and he passed out and his hair caught on fire, over his ear. And I freaked out but all he did was wake up and smack his hair a couple of times, like it was nothing. He looked at me like, *Don't say a word*.

On the Saturday I ran away he told me he was going out, it was the afternoon. I asked him where and he said there was something he wanted to buy off a guy on Craigslist. He said he'd be back in a couple hours. After he left I saw his phone lying there on the kitchen counter, he forgot his phone somehow. So either he was already high or he was nervous about something. I looked on it and yeah, he had Craigslist open and it was some listing out in Ivy Run, someone selling a bunch of jewelry, some neighborhood we never would've gone to. I didn't know what he would have wanted with that.

I remember... this little girl who lived in a trailer nearby, she put a box of Chips Ahoy on the stoop. That's all I remember of that whole day 'cause I was wasted by noon. I watched her do it through the window, I couldn't get off the couch. I hadn't eaten anything all day, so that was my dinner. I don't know why she did that...

Arthur didn't come back to the house, not a couple hours later, not for dinner, not by dark. I went to bed. I got back up at like eight because I was really scared that something had happened.

I went out into the yard. It was so cold. The people whose house it was had this pool, one of those ones that's above the ground. It was empty 'cause it was winter.

I heard humming, someone humming. I got up onto the ladder and I looked down and Arthur was standing in there, in the dark. He was moving his arms in front of him, real slow, like he was treading water, but no water was in there. Just humming, real low, and staring into space. I didn't know what he was high on, but it was something hardcore. I'd never seen him like that.

I went back into the house and I saw he'd been back in there sometime after I went to sleep. His shirt was on the kitchen floor, and there was blood all over it.

That was when I knew, deep down, I knew he'd done something really, really bad, like my friend had warned me about.

MONICA

Around about... dusk on February 1st, I don't know, I... I started to get this awful feeling that something was really wrong, and that was why Tom wasn't calling; it wasn't just because of the anger anymore. I couldn't place it. Something about the sun going down behind the dead trees at the edge of the neighborhood... that visual just made me so worried. I called some places I figured might have given him a ride out there. One of them told me to give this woman Lydia a call, but it wasn't till about ten o'clock that she finally picked up.

LYDIA

She offered to pay me to take a run out there. I told her I was due to pick him up for a supplies run on Monday but she was suddenly real worried. I wasn't doing anything, so I said OK. It wasn't like anyone was going to need to rent a truck or a kayak from me at 10 o'clock at night in the dead of winter.

I put my coat on and I told my grandfather what I was doing. He was a sheriff's deputy in Tribune for... ah, about nine years, back in the eighties before he taught history at the prison. When he got old, he started to fade. He became kind of strange in his beliefs, especially after he lost the house. My sister basically swindled him out of his money and vanished and he had to live with me, and he kind of went downhill from there. Kind of, ah... intense about religion but all over the place about it, none of it made any sense to me. And *really* superstitious.

He said he didn't want me going out there alone, and he kind of insisted on coming with me. That was kind of out of nowhere; he wanted to go out so little. He was seventy-eight. But he really meant it. I thought, What is *with* people tonight?

EVA

I put on the two sweaters I had, and my coat, and I took all the change from the coffee can in the kitchen. That was all the money I had in the world except forty in the bank, I was so scared I just left.

It was like a mile to the store. I kept looking behind me. They still had a pay phone. I had to use it because I had no money left on my cell. I called Julie. Maybe if she hadn't picked up, I would've gone back, but I don't know. I heard a siren somewhere and I was convinced they were going to the house.

I started crying as soon as she picked up. I asked her if I could come, and at first she said No, I had to understand the rules, but I told her I would do anything. I think she thought I might kill myself, so she finally said, OK, you can come.

And the problem then was how to get there. I didn't have any money and it was all the way in Glade, like thirty miles. I started walking down the road. I had a hat on but I didn't have any gloves. I was in real bad shape.

ANSON

I couldn't have told my Dad about my plan. I wanted to surprise him with the money. In my mind I would go out at night and in the morning I'd have it, I'd put it right on our kitchen table. But there was just no way out there, it was twenty miles. No buses or anything.

I had to trust Rennie. So I told him the story. I said, I'm sure the money's there, I'm sure of it. And he said he had an idea. He could get a car. He didn't have a license, he was too young. But he could

drive, he knew how to do it. The thing was, we'd have to go at night after his Dad left for his shift. That meant late. That meant I had to sneak out too.

But it felt like the most important thing in the world. This big adventure. This big secret. February 1st, first day of the month, for good luck.

I was fifteen. I wasn't thinking about the logic of any of it. I just thought we needed two shovels and two flashlights and nothing could stop us.

TOM

February 1. Tonight the winds are very still, it's so unusual. Yesterday I couldn't even leave the shack, it was so bitter. Now it's still cold but I could almost go for a walk to the beach. The sky looks muddy and swirling. I have the fire crackling nicely. Dinner was roasted potatoes, no meat since two days after I got here.

I think I will go out. I still can't quite shake my fear of the dark. I wonder if I stayed, if I ever would. Sometimes I turn the radio on just because the voices make me feel more secure.

LYDIA

We started driving in my Camry along Route 40 toward Iona Beach, and my grandfather smoked and looked out the window. Past the boardwalk there's really no more lights except whatever's on the road.

He was in a weird mood. He said, 'It's one big graveyard, that's what I think,' and I said, 'What are you talking about?' He meant the Braid. I asked him what he meant and he asked me if I ever thought about how many bodies must be there under the dunes. Bodies put there by the pirates going back and forth from Yellowtail, in the bad days of Winton Olag and so forth... put there when the drug trade and navy corruption had gotten so bad in the nineteenth century... put there when the fishing wars got violent in the nineteen twenties... some commune that turned bad in, like, 1865... it just went on and on, culture after culture doing terrible things, and all the traces just wiped out.

We dropped the Camry at the maintenance hut. That's where the one Land Rover I like most was in the repair bay; Mike had just been doing some cosmetic stuff on it. The thing to do was take the waterfront all the way down, hug the shore right along the tideline. No sense in plowing into the dunes in the dark till you absolutely had to. We'd get close to the shack to where that guy was living and then cut over.

TOM

Getting towards eleven. Headed out toward the water now. I finished the Lowenhertz history of the region this morning. It's an amazing book. There are a lot of buried secrets out here, going back to the early 18th century. A lot of bad men have passed through, or just the sinister things that happen between people where the ocean meets the land and there's a struggle for survival, economic or otherwise. There was even some war between Druid sects out here two hundred and fifty years ago; no one ever figured out who slaughtered who. One worshipped the sea, the other wanted to fish freely.

ANSON

I met Rennie at the Arby's parking lot. He was pretty nervous but he drove pretty well. We had a busted taillight so we had to get twenty miles without any cop seeing that.

We didn't talk much. As soon as we got to where the Braid started, he even turned off the radio. Usually he liked his music real loud.

TOM

Now all those cultures are long gone, and apparently nobody's interested now in really getting deep into the ground out here, into the layers beneath the sand, and retracing the past with what can be found. I'm sure Winton Olag and all the anonymous predators in history are glad for it. But I like this quote in the book: "There are more reasons to bury secrets, to prevent history from being discovered, than murder. Sometimes it is the simple fear that hands in the future will reach back through time to judge, and condemn, without full understanding."

ANSON

I had a map I drew on the back of a magazine, just a good guess about where the pumphouse was. But I almost lost track of where we were on the road 'cause I couldn't look away from the dunes. Neither could Rennie. It was like looking at the surface of the moon in a book. Just so dark, and no life, and these parts of grass and strange little hills. There were lights along the highway and it was scary to see how you got a little bit of light on the sand, but then it got darker and darker and only about twenty feet in it was probably gonna be a big dark maze where if we didn't have our flashlights, we'd be totally lost.

When we got kind of close I told him to turn around and pull over and park at a gas station that was closed for the night, it was the only place to leave the car at all that wasn't on the highway. I figured we'd have to walk from there. We both had our shovels and we tested the flashlights. That was the last part where it was exciting, the very last.

EVA

This guy picked me up on the coast road, almost right away. I thought, 'God is looking out for me.' It was this little compact car.

The guy was dressed in this long dark gown thing, like a priest would wear, with a sash and everything, but he was really young, he was my age. He had a beard and long hair and these big dorky glasses and kind of a baby's face. He was friendly. He said he could take me wherever I needed to go. Just the warm air coming out of the vents, that was like another sign from God.

So I started telling him about me because he asked, he asked me a lot of questions. I said, 'How come you're dressed like that, are you a priest?' But he said no, he wasn't part of the church anymore, but he taught Jesus's word anyway. I remember he was listening to Alice in Chains, and I was like, 'You like them too?' and he said 'Yeah.' He loved classic rock, so he was cool.

ANSON

When we got out there and we found out how hard it was to walk through the sand, we couldn't even really say much, it cost too much breath, so all we could hear was our breathing. Rennie was like, 'We should have come out there during the day. Nighttime isn't good. Nighttime is mystical.' That was such a weird thing to say; he wasn't himself. I didn't even know he knew that word.

EVA

He wanted me to tell him my entire story, so we were going down the highway, we had like a whole half hour to kill, and I was feeling good so I told him; I told him about jail and going all the way back to when I started with the drugs. He kept wanting to know who was to *blame* for it... and I was like, nobody. Nobody was to blame. I told him about how I lied to get out of jail early. He kept getting quieter and quieter, and I guess I felt so much like everything was gonna work out that I trusted him. I told him about some of the really bad stuff that happened with my cellmate. It was a relief to me, to say it. The road was just so long, you know, the road that goes out into the middle of nowhere, near the ocean.

So he pulls over for some reason at this closed gas station. And I was like, 'Why are we stopping?' And he looks at me through those big glasses with his big eyes, and he says, 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but you have to leave.' I said 'What do you mean—you want me to get out of the *car*?' And he goes, 'I can't have you in the car. You're tainted. You've done terrible, terrible things.' I said 'What do you mean? You teach Jesus's word, why are you *judging* me? I can't get out here, it's cold and dark.' But he just says, in his little soft voice, 'I'm sorry, I need to be away from you. Your soul can't be near mine.'

And we just looked at each other, and I realized he was serious. I started crying and I was like, 'You can't *do* this to a person, I need *help*.' But he wouldn't help me.

TOM

I was making my way toward the pumphouse, it was going to take about a half hour to get there. Eventually I went past the area where I'd seen that foreign light. I stopped there and listened. There was just that low roar from the ocean far away. I couldn't see much around me, I guess I was looking for a tent that was still there or something, some evidence of human life. There wasn't any.

I kept going, and about five minutes later, I saw it again. I saw that light. Way up ahead in the dunes. But clearer now. And it wasn't a lantern, it was just a ball of perfect luminescence. But this time I saw something more in the glow. It was a person, and the person was wearing what I thought was a white raincoat. I could see the side of a face and I saw grass on it, and I knew it was the same man I'd seen before. And he turned, and he took the light with him and he started walking away, basically toward the pumphouse.

This time, *this* time, I followed him.

LYDIA

We were getting close to the shack and my grandfather said, 'You know, Jimmy had a bad thing happen out here once.' Jimmy Del Norr used to be a drinking buddy of his, they were in the army together. He wrote novels sometimes, crime stuff or whatever, and he moved back to Upland from Massachusetts a few years back. Unpredictable old guy. Drinker. He said Jimmy went into the Braid once to bury something, money actually to try to promote some book, and he saw something that tried to carry him away. This was the kind of thing my grandfather would say when the dementia was just starting to develop: these weird pronouncements that didn't lead anywhere.

He started to talk about how there were places that protected their secrets. He said, 'I wouldn't want to dig around these dunes, that's for goddamn sure. It doesn't pay to get too curious out here.' I played along, I said, 'So Grandpa... who is it exactly that's protecting the secrets...?'

He just stared out the window. He actually fell asleep just before we had to turn into the heart of the Braid, and then it was so bumpy there was just no way. We got to the guy's shack in one piece, though that was the kind of driving that really gives me white knuckles, especially in the dark. You have to have some real skill to not get stuck.

My grandfather stayed in the Rover with the engine running. There was a light on in the shack, and I went up and knocked and called out the guy's name a couple of times. The door wasn't locked, so I stuck my head in. You could definitely tell someone was living here. No signs of distress or anything, very neat... and there was actually a radio playing, battery-powered. Everything seemed fine, like he'd just gone out to get firewood maybe.

I decided I'd take a little look around the area. I went back to tell my grandfather.

He said No. A flat no. I'd done my check, I'd fulfilled my obligation, and he didn't want me to go any further. I started to reason with him but he said he felt sick, his chest was getting tight. I couldn't tell if he was telling the truth or if he was actually just scared for some reason.

So I told him I'd make him a deal. We'd stay in the Rover. We'd explore just a little bit.

EVA

I got off the road 'cause I needed to take something. I knew I shouldn't, but I had some of that stuff Arthur called Tangerine with me, and I was scared. One hit of Tangerine, that all goes away in two seconds. And suddenly my feet were in sand. Cold sand. I was in this place where it was just dunes, all these small dunes I hadn't seen since I was a kid. But I could barely see anything.

ANSON

Rennie wanted to go back. I kept telling him we were close to the pumphouse, I had my map. But the truth was, I didn't have any good point to start from in the dark. There weren't the landmarks like I thought there would be. Rennie was nervous, he was like, 'What's that sound?' and I had to tell him he was hearing the ocean.

EVA

I sat down and I was about to take the stuff, but I wanted to change so bad I didn't do it. I fought against it for once. I was gonna bury the pills in the sand. I thought, God will be back with me if I make an effort, he'll show me where to go. So I walked over the sand; it killed my ankles and I get tired fast 'cause I'm pre-diabetic but I kept going. I picked out a spot... and I got down on my hands and knees... and I dug a deep hole with my hands, I really did. And I put the bag with the pills in it into the hole and I walked away.

I just want people to know that—that I had it in me to do that. No one'll ever really understand how bad I wanted things to be different.

ANSON

I wasn't even totally sure we were getting closer to the water because we kept veering around dunes and we lost sight of the coast road. We stopped and listened some more. And then it was like a miracle, 'cause I thought I saw the pumphouse way up ahead. But then I heard something else, I think it was an engine, a car engine, like someone was out there somewhere, driving around. Then there were headlights, a long way away. In the dunes. We got down and stayed down till they went away.

LYDIA

I drove as slow as I could, but I get a little nervous if I don't have enough speed in the sand, it always feels like you're grinding to a halt. My grandfather said, 'Look,' and there were footprints out there. But they always just kind of trail off into nowhere. The wind shifts the sand around fast.

EVA

I heard a car driving; you could tell it was in the sand somewhere. I looked all around but I didn't see it. I yelled out but it didn't do any good. Then it was gone.

TOM

I was sure I heard someone shouting, but I was so focused on trying to follow the man and then the sound of the engine that I thought maybe it had been something else, the birds. The headlights were on the beach, they were turning around. I thought it must have been Lydia. I kept walking.

ANSON

When I was like ninety percent sure it was the pumphouse we were seeing I told Rennie we should rest for a minute. He still wanted to go back. He was saying weird things, like how he didn't ever mean to be bad, he just did stupid things sometimes. He said he'd be all right when he was twenty-one. He wasn't making any sense because he was scared.

I saw something past his shoulder. It kind of came out of nowhere. From behind a dune maybe. It was a light. A real bright light, but tiny. Bigger than a flashlight though. Maybe fifty feet away. Rennie turned and he saw it too.

Someone was there, they were coming toward us, they spotted us, and they were holding a big lantern. We both froze.

Then it was crazy, because when we finally saw the person with the lantern, his arms were at his sides. But the light kept floating along beside him when he walked, without him carrying it. It was yellow and round, like a ball. You couldn't stare right into it. It had a huge glow that was getting bigger. It wasn't anything we have in the world.

The guy's face was painted, or he was wearing a mask or something, a mask of grass. He had a raincoat on, the kind that wraps around you with no buttons.

I yelled at Rennie to look away from him. Then I threw my shovel away and ran.

TOM

I couldn't keep up with that man, he was too fast. Eventually it was just nothing but dark again out there, no sign of him. I thought: I'm going home tomorrow. It's over. I'm going back to my life, and I'll wind up crawling back to the corporate world, because I'm not a great man. I'm a frightened one. And out here, in the dark, I'm truly, truly frightened.

EVA

I saw a little speck of light. It was near some kind of a house. I'd walk there and there'd be people. My legs were so sore, I couldn't even keep my balance. But the light meant safety, even though the house was totally dark. More like a cement building, a coast guard station or something.

The light was coming toward me. It was coming out to meet me. I was so relieved.. Someone must have spotted me. So I sat down in the sand and I waited, and I watched the light. It got bigger... and bigger.

ANSON

We ran for so long that when I finally fell down, I could hear the waves. We wound up close to the pumphouse, where we wanted to go all along.

I turned around but Rennie wasn't there. Just the dunes with nothing in them.

TOM

At the pumphouse, I put my hands on the side of it and I felt how cold the cement was. And I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, my hands were yellow. There was a glow nearby, it was washing over the cement.

LYDIA

I'd just turned the Rover around and were headed back down the beach when I saw something in the rearview mirror. I put the Rover in neutral and started to open the door, but my grandfather yelled at me to stop.

He took off his seatbelt and he leaned over and he was pressing something into my hand. It was some kind of a small circle, a medal. He said, 'If you have to get out of the truck, for God's sake, hold this.'

EVA

The man who came with the light and said things in my mind had some people with him. Three of them. Two kids and someone more like my age.

I said back to the man, *We won't tell anyone. We haven't found any secrets. Please. I'm turning things around. I want to get an office job like everybody else.*

I want to live.

JAMES DEL NORR

Saint Adjutor is a patron saint. Drowning victims. I've worn the medal ever since the day in the Braid when I buried the money. I had three made. I gave one to my sister because she lives in Iona Beach, and I gave one to my army friend Everett.

I know what I saw that day. I'm not delusional. I think only reason I'm still here is because it wasn't full dark when I saw it. Don't *tell* me there aren't things that want the dark, and the winter, to do what they do.

LYDIA

I was far away, I really was, but... I think it was a group of people, and they were all walking into the water. They were walking into the ocean in the dark. And these other people were sort of... guiding them in, they were holding lanterns or something. They were all dressed the same, and they were just pointing, like showing them where to go. And the ones walking into the waves just didn't stop. But to do that voluntarily, with the water that cold, that would have been suicide.

I got back in the Rover. I'd never seen my grandfather cry, but that's what he was doing, and because of that I drove him away from there.

MONICA

When they were investigating the disappearances, this woman Lydia told the police what she thought she saw, but it just confused things. I mean, the distance... and she wasn't really sure where she was in relation to the shack... it didn't give them much to work with.

They never found a trace of them. Just a couple of shovels the kids took out there.

That was seven years ago.

JAMES DEL NORR

Of *course* they never dug trying to find the bodies. Where would they have started?

LYDIA

Jimmy Del Knorr went in at one point and told about the money he buried out there, in case it had something to do with the missing people. The thing is, someone had already found it a couple years before this all happened. Some rich guy, actually. Didn't even *need* the money.

That's always the way, right?

(The sounds of the ocean, and the wind buffeting it relentlessly, come up one last time.

We hear that strange, androgynous voice from the prologue again, speaking low and without emotion, long pauses between each sentence.)

THE VOICE

I am a sweeper of the dunes.

Someone is coming.

They must not.

We will prepare them for the sea.

prisoner

My name is Malcom Sim. Working the boats when I was young, I got all over the world and to a lot of places that I didn't know the history of, the folklore of, whatever. It only really cost me once. One time.

I was working salt for CFT Lines. We were docked in Varna, on the Black Sea. There was trouble. I'd gotten in with a few guys who were smuggling pain pills all up and down the coast, and one of them talked. I woke up one afternoon on the boat and suddenly it felt like I had maybe an hour to jump ship and get the hell out of there. I was terrified, I was twenty-two.

So I ran for it. I gathered up my stuff, I went right to the train station and I pointed to a map on the wall, just someplace west, into the middle of nowhere, and the woman sold me a ticket. I was on that train for six, eight hours. I didn't expect it to get so hilly, and then the train was in the mountains and we stopped at some remote station, a hut basically, for what felt like forever, and someone told me the police were coming aboard to do a routine check of something or other, and I freaked out and snuck off.

I started walking down a dirt road in the dark at like two in the morning, had no idea where I was going. After about an hour, when it was obvious I wasn't going to come across a town or anything, I stopped. I thought I'd wait a little longer, then head back toward the station where I knew at least I wouldn't be open prey to bears or whatever.

A lot of people would say the area I was in was beautiful, I guess, but I didn't see it. Hills upon hills, deep forest, unpopulated, maybe one or two little old stone houses tucked away along the road, which was dirt sometimes, and sometimes pavement with no lines or markings. It was probably put down once fifty years before and never repaired, lots of cracks and holes in it. No cars went by, not one. I left the road and sat at the edge of a huge field under the stars, wondering what to do. Everything I owned in the world was in my backpack, all ten pounds of it. It was getting cold, birds were making sounds like I'd never heard before in the trees.

And here it came, the sound I was most scared of—dogs howling somewhere, probably a whole pack, god knows what kind, or how hungry to kill something they were. Wolves. It started with just one, kind of warbling, singing, and then others joined in; it sounded like flutes almost that would start and stop and rise and fall. A haunted kind of sound that just stopped suddenly.

I saw a glittering light, far away in the woods, so I walked in that direction, across these dark fields. And in a while I could see a house, but this one was *big*. It was tough to reach, the trees got thick and I lost the light sometimes and I had to climb a brutal hill and down the other side.

There it was. Pretty much a mansion, lots of brick and solid rock, with lights on in some of the windows. There wasn't any fence or gate on the back side; I just came out of the forest and I was on the grounds. It was tough to see anything in the dark but the lawn felt really overgrown, the grass was brushing my ankles. Something that looked like long heavy bags of dirt or mulch were spread around here and there.

I felt safe. I walked right up to the place, across a bumpy brick patio. I think I meant to knock on the big back door but it was open, wide open. Warm light inside, so I walked right in.

It was a damned nice place, I'll tell you that. I went down this hallway and I turned a corner and I was in a huge open room, big as a ballroom. Antique furniture and a massive complicated carpet, and a chandelier, and everything was red and brown and oak and gold, art on the walls, a pool table in the corner... it was made for a band to play in and people to dance in gowns and tuxedos.

But instead, there were dead people in it. There were dead people in it, lying on the carpet. I think seven or eight of them. Lying there, on their sides, on their stomachs, face up, face down. Men, women. No gowns or tuxedos, just t-shirts and jeans.

I would have run, but at first I couldn't be sure what I was seeing, I wanted to be sure. It was confusing because there was something about their skin that wasn't right. I had to get close to a few of the bodies for it to sink in. Most of them, it looked like somebody had crawled inside their skin and then painted them with light blue streaks from underneath it. Wide blue streaks with a brush, I had never seen that before and I thought, *Is this real?* One guy, half his face was like that, one of his eyes was bulging out. And I heard a voice behind me.

It's the Exohemparin. That's what this guy behind me said, in the kind of accent I'd heard in ports on the Black Sea and on the train. I turned and there he was, standing on the curving steps that led up to a balcony. He was coming down, step by step, real slow. He was my age, as skinny as me, but with a huge beard, and a ponytail. Wearing sweats, wrinkled gray sweats.

The Exohemparin caused that blue look, he said. He looked at the bodies like he was a medical student just kind of interested in the effect for a paper he had to write.

Even at twenty-two I'd already learned you don't show fear when you're in a situation you don't understand. You turn on your aggression, no matter how scared you are, that's how you survive things. I told him he should maybe think about not taking one more step down that staircase until he told me what had happened here. But it was like he didn't care; he couldn't take his eyes off the bodies, so he kept coming, he came all the way down.

He told me he'd hidden through the whole thing, he'd been hiding under his bed like a little kid, and stayed there for hours and hours. But he'd suspected what they'd done. They'd come looking for him but they never found him.

That one over there, he said, and he pointed to the body that was closest to my feet. Some guy in his sixties maybe. Eyes closed. Peaceful. Chin up, like he was soaking in the rays of the chandelier. His lips and forehead were blue. *That's Dr. Penny.* He'd finally convinced them all to do it. It had been suicide, every one of them. The ones here and the ones on the back lawn. The ones I'd thought in the dark were bags of mulch maybe. I said *Why?* My host, which is how I think of him now, he collapsed into a big wicker chair and scrunched his hands real tight on the arms. He looked so tired he could barely keep his head up.

He said things had been strange here in the mansion for months, what with Dr. Penny filling their heads with all kinds of weird philosophies. Drugs too, there'd been a lot of drugs.

And then, one day, they'd captured the prisoner. After that, a couple of people—my host told me their names, but I've forgotten them—started to really lose their minds. There was fighting over what they should do with the prisoner, but it didn't really matter. Even Dr. Penny, who'd

worked for ten years to catch one, couldn't deal with how black the sight of the prisoner made his mind. He started talking about what it meant in his belief system, and it wasn't pretty.

Sometime around eight o'clock that night, my host had heard everyone coming out of their rooms. And he just knew the end was here. He hid. He saw people come into his room, saw their feet from under there, but no one had looked under the bed. They all went downstairs. He'd heard Dr. Penny telling them all something. There was music, someone played an LP of some old Ukrainian pop star, and I remember seeing that ridiculous record jacket beside the turntable in that room as the story was told to me. For some reason that's in my mind as permanently as the corpses. That music was the last sound my host had ever heard from any of them. Then I came along.

I asked about this prisoner, who the prisoner was. *Would you like to see him?* my host asked me, and I said, *What I'd like is for you to maybe keep sitting right there in your chair, and not move, because I am leaving.* He stroked his big beard and smiled and said I'd be doing him a favor if I at least looked, because he didn't know himself sometimes if the prisoner was real or a delusion. Over the last two years Dr. Penny had drubbed all the local legends into them about the things that supposedly lived in these mountains, but it was still impossible to truly believe. He raised an arm and pointed to an oversized door in the corner of the room. He told me it was right through there, that's all I needed to do, was go through the door.

I went that way. I tried not to look at the bodies again. I tried to keep an eye on my weird host as I went but he didn't seem to have the slightest interest in approaching me.

Through the door there was darkness. Only if I kept the door open was there enough light to see by. The room was as big as the one I'd just left, bigger even, but there was absolutely nothing in there. Just a vast cement floor in every direction, like I'd stepped into an empty factory or a slaughterhouse or something. An echo every time I moved. And up ahead, a big raised square, it looked like when you cover a pool with tarp stretched real tight.

I moved deeper in. Then there was a sudden snapping sound and I froze. I heard chains moving, gears turning. I turned around and saw my host's silhouette standing in the doorway. He'd reached an arm into the room and activated a mechanism on the wall that I couldn't see.

Whatever was covering the huge square ahead of me was retracting. It was a rusty, clanging sound, like the mechanism was old or not cared for very well. It went on for ten seconds, then it was quiet again. A giant grating had been revealed.

My host tossed something through the air at me, underhand. It hit the floor and skittered in my direction. It was a flashlight, a big heavy-duty thing as long as my forearm. I stepped to my left and picked it up and switched it on. When I looked up again, the guy had left the doorway and was gone.

I walked up to the grating and shone the light onto it. The grid looked metallic and created dozens of holes about three feet wide each. The beam from the flashlight reached down into the holes but died before it hit anything. I leaned over and coughed just to hear the echo. I could tell by it that the pit was very, very deep. Just blackness down there. It was cold down there too, a draft came up.

I looked and listened. I didn't know what I was supposed to be seeing or hearing. But I was fascinated by then. And I waited.

Eventually I heard something moving, shifting. I kept moving the flashlight, trying to spot it down there. The beam caught something. Some colorless mass about ten or fifteen feet down. At first I swear I thought a giant balloon was floating from left to right, that's what I thought, because it was so quiet. But the beam caught more context, more depth, just enough to form a different shape.

I think I told you already I didn't know anything about the region. The myths. Never read anything. Why should I have? I grew up in Akron, for God's sake.

What passed from left to right, out of the shadows and back into them again so quickly, was the top of a human head, and the bare neck and bare shoulders that supported it, a bald human head, but of a size so gigantic that after it had stopped moving and found another space out of the reach of my flashlight beam, I took five involuntary steps back from the grating and calculated, calculated, trying to bring some kind of mathematical logic to it. The prisoner must have been... I couldn't, I couldn't right then even make a guess. But I understood why the grating was so big, why the pit below had to be constructed specially.

The prisoner had made no sound beyond the shifting of its limbs down there. Everything was silent again for a minute, but then there was a staticky pop and I heard my host's voice coming through a PA speaker somewhere.

It was tough to make out the words sometimes because of the little dropouts, the gaps. He said he thought it was finally time to open the *other* door now. It made sense to do it. There was no point in keeping it shut anymore. Then a second click and pop, and he was gone again.

I approached the grating for another look. But the prisoner didn't appear again, didn't respond to the probing of the flashlight. I pointed the beam around the huge cold room around me and I only saw a blocky object in one far corner, silvery-looking. If I'd been listening more carefully when I came in, I might have heard it humming. A refrigerator. My first thought was: *feeding*.

My host must have pressed another button somewhere, because I could hear another clumsy mechanism working in the distance, grinding, like it was in some faraway part of the house, or down below me. When it stopped, a big clock in the other room chimed five times. Listening to that helped me breathe actually, helped me settle my nerves.

I kept hold of the flashlight and turned and left the chamber before I could hear anything else that might scare me. In the other room I looked at the bodies, how they had settled in death. They must have all laid down beforehand, on the carpet. I spotted a couple of paper cups nearby. One of the women had covered the left side of her face with her hand like she was shy, or maybe didn't want to see what was going on as she... faded.

I went to the other side of the mansion, toward the front entrance. Down another hall, past a kitchen, past a room of marble with a fireplace as big as any I'd ever seen. I went to the front door and opened it.

This side of the house bordered woods and fields too. There was no main road leading here. The place was totally isolated. The sky outside was still partially dark, and gray. A very light rain had begun to fall, not more than a mist.

Something was out there, a tiny visual anomaly out beyond the overgrown grounds and beyond a long, gentle slope toward what looked like an orchard. Beyond that the hills started, and the dense forest, the kind of terrain that would probably swallow me up with no chance of finding my way. And in the distance, those tall mountains that were nothing but ominous black cutouts. I had a lot of courage back then, much more than I do now, thirty years later. I walked toward the orchard.

There, my host was slumped down in the wet grass with his back against a tree. He was dead. His mouth was hanging stupidly open. His eyes were half shut. He was clutching a paper cup. I kneeled in front of him. His whole neck was blue, like he'd been strangled by brutal hands. He must have pressed that button and right away, with no hesitation, walked to his death spot. Maybe he knew I'd be passing by.

The mansion was small now in the distance behind me. I could go back there, around it, and walk back the way I'd come from. But looking at those mountains in the distance, I believed, I *believed*, that the prisoner wanted them instead. That was where I should go if I wanted to *see*, and now I desperately did.

I went toward the forest. I wouldn't have gone far, I can tell you. I would have stopped when they got too dense, maybe only a few hundred yards. I had no desire to stumble around blindly in this foreign land unprotected. I had a perimeter of safety very much in my mind. I had just reached its edge when my perception of reality changed forever.

The sky was now a solid gray, maybe only another ten minutes before true dawn. The rain was so soft, I remember, this fine silent spray that barely even soaked my clothes. I never felt a rain quite like that before. No wind. The trees were getting thick around me and I heard scampering things in the brush. I was facing east, and then I turned briefly to the north to start following a thin lazy stream, and I heard something big moving near me. Up ahead and to my right. The trees in that direction were jostled ever so slightly.

The prisoner appeared in a wide gap among the trees. We'd been travelling almost parallel to each other. I will make my final guess about its height, since I can't trust my memories to ever be more concrete than they are now. Its head was maybe a few yards taller than the trees behind it, so I will say fifty feet, its naked body proportionate. The body had no color, none. It wasn't muscled like a regular body; the limbs were doughy and without much definition. But it was, recognizably, a creature like you or me. It moved uncertainly, with careful calculation. I craned my neck and saw it take three huge steps toward the east and then stop.

The prisoner began to turn. Its head swiveled like it was totally unjoined from its body. Where you or I would partially twist our torsos at the sense of some sound or scent behind us, it was only its head that turned, like on a rusty hinge.

The prisoner had no corneas in its eyes. I didn't even know that word back then, I had to look it up later. They were just white all the way through. The defining ridges above them were almost nonexistent, like someone had just pushed two white marbles into a misshapen lump of dough and said, *I call you Man*.

It saw me. I felt it. It was almost an out of body experience, the fear I felt. Like my spirit was leaving me behind to die. I started to turn to escape. And then... there was a brief blip of movement in the sky, some dark mass flitting into my vision from the right. There was a thumping sound that was delayed by the distance for maybe a quarter of a second, and then a small explosion of dust or ash erupted from the prisoner's neck and left shoulder. Dust or ash, not blood.

It had been struck by a passing flock of birds. The prisoner's jaw dropped and it shrieked, a high-pitched and almost musical cry completely unlike anything I would have believed a body like that would have inside of it. Its entire head tilted suddenly to the left, like some vital structure inside the neck had been snapped, and it settled at a hideous angle. The small section of the body that had sustained the blow was just gone, the debris that had been loosened was sifting down to the ground, dissipating. And the prisoner began to fall.

Then I was running. Not once but twice I slipped and slammed onto the ground just like the panicked victim in some horror movie. It was the slickness of the terrain beneath my feet that got me the first time, and my sheer momentum the second time. I ran back through the orchard, past my host's corpse, and very soon got back into the mansion. I emerged into the front room and found myself among all the bodies again, my shirt and pants soaked and muddy. I had decisions to make.

I took the coward's way out. I made no phone call to the authorities. I collected myself and ran through my mind the route back toward the train station as best I could given my unhinged state of mind. I had to go over it again and again, my hands clutched to the side of my head, I was so scared that I couldn't make simple connections.

For ten minutes I was among the dead bodies. Then I went out the back door, where I saw, for the first time, the details of the other five or six corpses I'd been spared the night before, including one body in a wheelchair on the patio. I had no idea how I hadn't seen him the night before, but then again, maybe he'd been around somewhere, still alive, listening to my host and I speak maybe, before deciding like the others that Dr. Penny's idea was one that should be followed.

My wobbly legs took me far away. I never truly felt safe until the train hut appeared, a sign of humanity. I couldn't go in there, not in my state. Whenever they eventually found the scene at the mansion, I'd be too memorable an image—that is, if the police in Varna hadn't already forwarded my picture around. I never did go back inside that train station. Getting out of the country took two weeks. And I had to cover a lot of ground on foot.

No, I never saw another thing like the prisoner in my desperate time crossing that terrain. I heard wolves, and even saw them. I went hungry and sleepless, frightened of so many sounds. I stuck close to villages and small towns and never rested my head at night unless I could see lights through the trees. On my last day in that country I dared enter a library in a village called Bombrostu. I read things there, about mountain myths and legends and impossible things no one believed in anymore. There was a newspaper in the library too. Dr. Penny and his friends had only been discovered after five days of lying in and around that mansion. No mention of anything found in the woods. And who would know to look for the signs of something being dragged away by something of similar size?

I read about one more thing in the library: about birds, and how unlikely it was that a whole flock of them could miscalculate and crash into an almost stationary object, maybe killing them all. And to this day I think they were attacking instead.

Within a month, I had managed to get to Warsaw. Then, someone got me on a boat all the way into Dundee. Within three months, I was back in America. I've never committed another crime.

I live in Jersey City now. Here, the closest things to real mountains are giant towers of steel and glass, and construction cranes that make rusty, high-pitched, almost musical sounds when they bend just so in the distance.

I Was Called Anwen

THE DOCUMENTARIAN, PATRICIA

My name is Patricia Close. Two years ago, I proposed to Orion Public Radio an audio series about the award-winning actor George Fordham. I eventually spent several days with George talking about his career, his acting method, even his childhood. One day, as we drove around his hometown of Tracy, Minnesota, he said he wanted to visit his old high school, as he hadn't been there in almost thirty years.

It was there that he began to tell the strange story which comprises the entirety of this documentary. It took some time to get the entire tale, as George would only return to it with some reluctance, though more and more the sense of unburdening was undeniable. I believe it resulted in a more enduring work than was originally released, even if I may never release this one publicly.

To effectively convey the full story of George's friend Cooper Rabin required an additional year of researching letters and emails pertaining to what happened between the years 1993 to 2021, correspondence I have narrated here.

Though it seemingly has no relevance to the story, it is interesting to note one particular aspect of the collectible card game George Fordham mentions, called Spectral Korps. The game has, as its main component, hundreds of strange cards bearing lurid, vivid illustrations of demons and spirits and monsters, capering and lunging and emerging from the shadows to haunt the players' minds.

(A microphone follows George across a field.)

GEORGE

OK, so... right here... I swear to God, I wrote a smart-ass essay in the newspaper, the school paper, *begging* the principal to fix the lean in this goalpost, this was the one, where the scoreboard is... and it has been *thirty-one years* and look at it.

You have *got* to find the original photo of it we ran in the paper and compare it to this, there is not *five degrees* of difference in the lean! Damn you, Mr. Marsh, you are worthless!

Actually he was like ninety back then, so actually I apologize...

(Now he is inside one of the school hallways.)

GEORGE

That's me there in the case, Drama Club. Check out that haircut—that's me rocking James Spader in *Less Than Zero*, I think.

PATRICIA

Were you popular with the girls?

GEORGE

Um.... that was more first year of college... No, I did all right, I did all right.

PATRICIA

Who'd you go to prom with?

GEORGE

Oh God, that is a story. *That's* a story.

(Now George is back outside.)

GEORGE

I had my snazzy light blue tux, right, we're walking to the car, and she lets me have it right there, as soon as her parents are out of earshot. She didn't even get in, she dumped me right there. She caught me, I lied to her. She goes right back inside, it lasted two minutes. So... I'm just dazed, I don't know what to do, I start driving around and I wind up at Cupatello's, in the light blue tux, I just want a bad turkey sub and then to disappear, basically.

PATRICIA

So you never went to prom.

GEORGE

No. I'm standing at the counter and I see this guy in the corner, Cooper, Cooper Rabin. I had one class with him, we never spoke except the week before he had to share his book with me because I forgot mine—

PATRICIA

Which class?

GEORGE

Ahhh.... American Government. We kind of saw each other and ah... he was... I mean, no one really knew him, he was one of these kids who didn't have *any* personality, I hate to say it; he wasn't a nerd, he wasn't a jock, he wasn't a goth, a brain... he had no group, he had no friends, he wore these clothes like he was intent on being totally invisible, so... we were on total opposite ends of the popularity spectrum. But on prom night I was messed up, all I could think about of course was, "Oh my god, people are going to be talking about me on Monday, and I have playoffs against Chester Park on Tuesday."

So I went over and said Hi to him, and I think I said I was sorry for getting his name wrong in front of the entire class, ah.... and I basically laid down in the booth with my feet sticking out, and we kind of talked a little bit as I waited for my food, he was sitting there with his milkshake and he was playing this card game by himself. At that time I didn't have the imagination to understand that kind of thing. To me it was, you know, "Oh, this Cooper's one of those *sci-fi/fantasy guys*, oh wow, that's so *weird*." But ah... he knew I was dating Lee so I told him what happened, it felt kind of good to tell someone I didn't know, and I wound up offering him a ride home.

(Now George is elsewhere, indoors, settled.)

GEORGE

What did we talk about...well, I got that he *really* didn't like his father, his father had basically forced him out that night. He'd been up in his bedroom playing his game and his father kind of lurked in the hallway and said, "Uh, it's prom night, do you maybe at least want to go out with friends?" So Cooper had slunk out, hating life, he walked all the way to Cupatello's, past the donut shops and the tire outlets. His dad had actually gotten out of jail six months before, tax fraud, three years he was away and Cooper had to go live with his grandmother. And *my* dad had died in September, so we talked about that stuff. And then he was like, "Hey we have a ton of ice cream, do you want to come in?"

PATRICIA

How did your father die?

GEORGE

Took his own life. He'd been living in Madison, my parents were divorced for years.

(In yet another location:)

PATRICIA

So how does it work?

GEORGE

Ah God, it's been how many decades since he showed me, but it was like... you gathered your monsters or your demons from the deck into these 'clans' and you staged these battles... by about

eight o'clock he'd taught me up pretty good, but I couldn't win a battle against Cooper, he was *on* it, he knew that game inside out. We were having a pretty good time in his kitchen though, but I never took my tux jacket off, I swear I had it on the whole time.

PATRICIA

What time did you leave?

GEORGE

Not till like ten. We were up in his room, and I was trying to get him to tell me... this girl had talked to him in class, this girl Belle Camuto, real quiet, kind of wore this back brace, I was trying to get him to tell me exactly what she said to him because I was pretty sure she'd actually asked him to the prom and he didn't even realize it. Cooper was that kind of guy: Nothing good could *possibly* happen, oh *no*. It was, you know, me trying to coach him up a little about girls, but I was wiped out, I left, but um...

I don't know, I don't know if I should tell about Cooper. I probably shouldn't say much.

PATRICIA

We can always—

GEORGE

Well, it was strange, so... I'm on my way of the bedroom and he goes, "Hey, before you leave, can you do me a favor, and give me those pennies on the chair there?" And I look down, and I don't see anything, there's just the one chair in the room, but he points, he's like, "Those, right there." And I said, "Ummmmm... you mean the pennies from Mars that don't exist?"

And he looked very sad all of a sudden. He apologized, he said something weird had been happening to him recently, I should just forget it. And I left... but that moment was so awkward, that silence, I didn't know what had just happened. His mind had slipped two grooves or something.

I figured I'd see him at graduation, but he didn't go, he had to go to summer school it turned out, his grades sucked, he just didn't care about anything.

So that was my prom night, a three hour friendship. Which I never even mentioned to my friends. That was the kind of lousy teenager I was back then.

PATRICIA

Then you graduated, so you never saw him again?

GEORGE

Well... I don't know, maybe we'll talk about that. Maybe.

(Next, we hear Patricia narrating a letter.)

“October 2nd, 1993.

“Kingsford,

“My flight from JFK was delayed but I made it across the pond okay. I drove to see Clare Yellitz today at the mansion. She’d sent me a message that she was dying. It rained and rained.

“She won’t be getting up from her bed ever again, but she was having a good day. She told me an attorney is going to call us after she’s gone, and we’re going to be getting a lot of money. It’s all meant to go to a foundation she wants us to set up, so that what happened to her husband won’t happen to anyone else without someone at least understanding, or attempting to. His nightmares are apparently still a constant, but he doesn’t seem to want to harm himself and she’s really very grateful to us.

“It’s going to be about three hundred thousand dollars. We can talk about this when I get back from Ireland. My first concern is how we’re going to go about keeping a foundation like this quiet, year after year. Sometimes I imagine the future of the internet, and I can see it becoming a real problem.

“You’ll be interested to know that all the rooms on that one side of the mansion, where it all happened, are still exactly as they were two years ago. Clare left them in that state. It’s eerie to see them in the daylight. The paint everywhere looks even more red somehow, and you notice more of the objects her husband soaked with it when he went insane. You notice how he got every single inch of every corner: the light switches, the piano keys, the drapes. All a screaming red. It’s a museum of madness.

“But no more sounds from inside the walls, at least. They’re gone. Or so she says.

“Signed,
Agatha.”

(Street sounds rise. George is in the city.)

GEORGE

I was doing *American Buffalo* here, at the Cherry Lane Theater, and my nephew was attending some Spectral Korps expo event thing about two blocks from where I was getting coaching during the day to flatten out my upper midwest accent—

PATRICIA

What year was this?

GEORGE

‘98. The tournament was going on right down on Houston so after coaching one day I walked down there to the Radisson or whatever, and they were just finishing up, the whole thing was petering out, so I got there just in time. And there he was, there was Cooper, skinnier even than he was... and he’d won the tournament of course, I forget how much money it was but it wasn’t bad, I know that. More than *I* was making. And I think he just barely recognized me, so it was a little awkward at first, but he warmed up and he asked me if I wanted to see his little RV; he was

driving around the country tournament to tournament in this RV, and I thought Hell *yeah*, I want to see an RV!

(George stands inside the parking garage.)

GEORGE

He was parked like right over there in the corner, it was a wee little thing, all by itself... great atmosphere in here, right? But we sat there for a bit with root beer or something, and we reminisced a little.

(Now he's back indoors.)

GEORGE

He never graduated, he left home during the summer and he figured if he got really, really good at one thing, maybe he could get somewhere. Never saw his family anymore.

I was the one who brought up prom night. I'd had a dream about it a month before. It was basically a recreation of the night, except it was just the part where we were talking about girls, and I was headed back home. In the dream he said something about marbles on a chair, and in the dream I was saying, "Are you insane? We have to get you to a hospital." And he said—this is in real life, in the RV—he said it was pennies, it was pennies. And I said "Ahhhhh, right, pennies." In the dream he morphed into a devil or something, something right off a Spectral Korps card, and I ran into the ocean.

And that's when he told me, as we sat there, that something was happening to him back then. He asked me if he could tell me something he'd never told anybody else, nobody ever.

Before I came over, he'd been seeing weird things for about eight months. He was seeing pennies. Around his house, they'd just appear. Eleven of them, a group of eleven. Like they'd be on a table in a circle, or even on the wall sometimes. But he couldn't *feel* them. He would reach out his hand, but when he got close, they would disappear.

And that kept happening. It had never stopped. He'd been seeing them ever since. In the RV there, or... when he stayed in a hotel once in a while. Outdoors a couple of times. Eleven pennies, always eleven.

So, I was... Well, I asked him if he'd ever been checked out. He said, "That was the first thing I ever spent any money on, was going to a doctor. Went to three of them."

PATRICIA

How often did he see the pennies?

GEORGE

About every week, two weeks, or so. He said sometimes they were in different patterns; they were on the ceiling once... they'd just vanish if he was just about to touch them. And sometimes he could feel something happen before he saw them, not always. It felt like someone had come into the room, just... halfway.

PATRICIA

But he never saw what it was?

GEORGE

No. He couldn't take a picture of the pennies either, they just weren't *there*, that's what he said.

PATRICIA

What was—

GEORGE

He was scared that it wasn't ever going to go away, he'd just seen the pennies again at a rest stop driving into town. On the sink in the bathroom. Old dates, too, from the twenties or before, so he could tell it was always the same group of pennies.

PATRICIA

What was your reaction to this?

GEORGE

Politeness...? I was the only one he knew personally that he'd told, which was.... You know, he still didn't have any friends. But I was gonna back to my life and he was going on to Cleveland, so it felt OK to him, we weren't gonna hang out. He just wanted to tell someone finally. He'd been more scared than normal the last few months.

PATRICIA

How come?

GEORGE

He didn't say. He *did* say he'd written to this "group," they investigated stuff like this, he'd been going back and forth with them for a while. So... I asked him as many questions as I felt comfortable with, but I just... finally I just gave him my card and said, *Hey, you know, call me sometime, let me know what happens. I hope you get through this.*

PATRICIA

Did *you* really want to know?

GEORGE

No.

(Patricia reads.)

"From *Time Out*, September 7, 1998.

"For those who want a little edge to their evening, Cherry Lane Theater's production of David Mamet's *American Buffalo*, running through November 15, is a can't miss. Director Tony Groh's minimalist production puts the spotlight squarely on the Pulitzer Prize-winning hyper-real dialogue as delivered by three splendid actors—Larry Pine as Teach and Roscoe Lee Browne as Donny playing off newcomer George Fordham, whose embodiment of the naive character of Bobby has more comedic thrust than any portrayal we've seen before."

(George reads from an email.)

“George: I thought I’d try out your email address. It was cool that you came by the hotel.

“I feel bad because I didn’t tell you about something that happened last year. It was the thing that scared me and kind of changed things. I told the group that’s looking into my case, but nobody else. Anyway, I don’t want you to think I’m looney tunes or paranoid. A lot of people are jerks and wouldn’t even bother with me. That’s why I hated high school so much. But you’re a pretty good friend.

“I won’t abuse your email or anything, don’t worry. I don’t like email that much anyway. But I’ll tell you the details. It happened right after my father died and the house got taken by the bank.”

(George, indoors.)

GEORGE

His father had died, and to cover his debts the bank was going to have an estate sale, and they said to Cooper, OK, you can go in the day before and take whatever you want that’s yours and *doesn’t* have a blue tag, just make whatever arrangements you need to. So he’s alone in the house, it’s like eleven at night, he hasn’t been there in a few years. But all his stuff is just like he left it, the posters on the wall... He’s walking through and he goes into his parents’ bedroom and into the closet. They kept some of his old things in there, in this big plastic chest, from when he was a kid, so he kneels down and starts going through that, and behind him the closet door slams shut. Hard.

He turns around and he sees pennies jammed into the crack, in a line, where the door meets the frame. He turns the knob, pushes on the door, and he can’t get out. The pennies are wedged so tight in there, the door won’t open. So what does he do, he goes to pry them out but... they’re not there. He starts yanking on the door, pushing on it, he starts throwing his entire weight against it, nothing works. He’s in the closet, he’s trapped in there. He starts backing up, running at the door, no way that thing shouldn’t have opened. But it didn’t. Bam, again and again, terrified. He slumps down, he eventually goes to sleep, around dawn he finally kicks his way out of it, destroys the door, goes down the hall, falls asleep on top of his old bed.

(George continues reading the email.)

“Nothing like that had ever happened before. It’s funny, but I was kind of used to the pennies leaver by then. Now, I don’t know.

“The people who are looking into this all for me are expensive, but they’ve told me some interesting things.

“Signed,
Cooper.”

GEORGE

He would be in a tournament every two weeks, he won about half of them, so if you do the math, it was enough to get by on, definitely. He was doing OK.

PATRICIA

What was the Walmart thing you were talking about?

GEORGE

Well, he would park there a lot of nights, you know, whatever town he was in, he'd park at Walmart overnight. So he was in Cincinnati, he's parked, it's real late, he's alone there in the RV. He has almost a full bed in there, in the corner, I remember seeing it, and he gets into it like normal, and...

I'm trying to... how did he describe it... he could sort of see himself in the reflection of the window there. And only about five minutes after he got into bed, he thought he saw something in the reflection, something behind him. A shape. But instead of getting up he just squeezed his eyes shut, and then.... he felt something in the bed with him. For the first time. Not something getting into it—it was just suddenly there, some presence, almost tight against his back. And he leapt out of bed and he left the RV. That was the first time too, I think, that he had said something, after all those years, he finally said *Who are you?*

Nothing. And he spent like two hours wandering the aisles of Walmart trying not to think about it, and then another hour just watching the RV from the curb across the parking lot. He didn't go back in there till sunrise.

It was right around then that he started to get really scared.

(We hear Patricia reading a different email.)

"October 10, 2002.

"Hello Mrs. Fordham,

"Just a note to let you know that your daughter's behavior this week has been fine. What you're really looking for is *patterns* of poor adjustment over time, and I still do think I see a bit of a pattern with Olive. Five is such an unpredictable age, and she might be very different six months from now, so again, it's just something to keep in mind, and I'll try to observe her interactions with other kids as best I can.

"To answer your husband's question about how early I've gotten a sense of which children are going to be socially OK and which might not be, there's really no particular age I can define. Keep in mind I'm not a trained child psychologist.

"We can discuss this more next Friday.

"Thanks,

Signed,
Michelle Roth.”

(George is in his car, driving slowly.)

GEORGE

OK, so this is Freedom Street, I didn't know it was just a block off Main, I really didn't. And that's 110, right there, we already passed it. So I lived three blocks from Belle since elementary school. I had no idea. But you know, she didn't go to our bus stop, so she was a citizen of another world, that's how kids were. Three blocks.

(Indoors.)

GEORGE

It was actually the roughest time, because I kept getting parts and having to fly out west and we didn't want to take Olive out of school, I was really worried about her, too much maybe, and we finally just had to, it was all out in Los Angeles for me, and when *House of the Long Winter* came along, that was it, there was no more for me here. I moved my mother out there, I was exhausted all the time, I would lie there kind of hoping the movie would fail and I could just teach acting at Twin Cities, stay here. But that page had turned. And then Belle called me one day.

PATRICIA

How'd she find you?

GEORGE

My mother gave her the number for my agency, I was literally in the office when she called, otherwise she might never have gotten through. The receptionist there said "Um, Mr. Fordham, I think there's a phone call for you." I picked up and she goes, "Hi, do you remember me, my name is Belle. It's okay if you don't, I can hang up."

She asked me if I was still in touch with Cooper, but it had been a couple of years, some email I sent him bounced back. She wanted to get together and talk about him a bit, and I was headed back here to finalize some house stuff, so I said OK and we swapped email addresses, but I had no idea what it was really going to be about.

PATRICIA

What did you remember about her?

GEORGE

Not a whole lot. She's a low talker, you know, I had to ask her to speak up a lot, and at first I thought she said Michelle instead of Belle, the conversation was kind of a mess, but we got it sorted out.

(At Cupatello's. We hear the sounds of a so-so sub joint.)

GEORGE

This is the locally infamous Cupatello's... as you can see, I was not lying, that's how they big they cut the fries, so they were always undercooked in the center, every time, but this is where we met up. She came in, and she still had the back brace from high school, still had it, she was always trying to hide it with boy clothes, basically, t-shirts down to her knees. She was working down at the grocery store on Vanner, night shift. She'd brought a sandwich with her, we both got shakes but she sat down and unwrapped this BLT she'd brought from home, so she hadn't changed, really. Um...

PATRICIA

Did you talk about anything other than Cooper?

GEORGE

Well, that's the only thing we had in common, so no. She kind of got in touch with him through a forum a year before, to ask him how he was doing and stuff. Turns out she did have a little crush on him in high school, just like we'd talked about. She never told anyone because nobody seemed to like him much. But he was nice to her. So... they just played Stargate online forever—*Starcraft*, sorry—and then they wound up having kind of a date when he was here, it was between his tournaments... and she said it was pretty bad, I could imagine what a date for the two of them would have been like, apparently very awkward, both really nervous... and at the end of it, he just started telling her everything about the pennies, it all came out of him. So she didn't know if he was interested in her or just wanted someone to tell the story to.

She was sitting right where you are and she imitated what Cooper's face did when they separated at the door over there. It was so sad, he realized he'd screwed up horribly, kind of like he'd done with me. My little theory is that it was this kind of separation anxiety: Cooper was so convinced he wasn't interesting to anybody that when he sensed he was about to be abandoned, he just started uncontrollably saying the thing that would make him different, special, which was his haunting.

She'd been completely weirded out. So of course I told her I knew the whole story. But there was more to it. He'd been spending a lot of money on these people he would only give her vague details about when they talked on the phone, they'd been allegedly trying to piece things together for him. They'd made him keep a journal of everything he saw and heard for months and months. Longer than that, actually.

That presence he felt sometimes, they thought it was a woman. Based on little things, like the arrangement of some fashion magazines in a bookstore when he went.

PATRICIA

How did that work?

GEORGE

Well, they were in a, a kind of pattern that was sort of duplicated in the lobby of a hotel about a month later, the faces were grouped in some kind of... anyway, these were the kinds of things they had him write down. They told him that the presence might be trying to express to him what she looked like.

PATRICIA

Wow.

GEORGE

And where the pennies were placed too, certain surfaces more than others... the incident in the RV too, other stuff like that, so... Belle had tried to keep up the phone calls, but he was on the road again and she sensed he was fading out, and he was still scared. She thought these people he was dealing with kept asking him for more and more money. Cooper had sent her a picture of this stack of notebooks they made him keep since the beginning, she said it was really disturbing.

And again I was just... not sure of what I was supposed to do. She gave me his email address, and I said, "Well, this bounced back," but then I actually looked at it, really looked, and it couldn't have been more obvious what had happened. I'd just transposed a couple of letters, I knew it right away. I think that was a passive aggressive maneuver on my part, not looking.

PATRICIA

Because you were wanting an excuse to cut him off?

GEORGE

Exactly.

She never thought Cooper was super good-looking or anything. She said he sat sort of diagonally from her in English class. They never really talked, but she borrowed a pencil from him a couple of times because he would always have three pencils next to his notebook, exactly three—I knew that, like he was expecting they'd have to write a novel in class. And she remembered the second time she asked, he gave her this really fancy one, super sharp, brand new, like he'd been hoping she'd ask again and he had this special little thing for her, all prepared.

PATRICIA

You didn't have to say yes to meeting her, but you did.

GEORGE

Oh God, I felt so bad. You know, I had said some nasty things about her back in the day... stuff you say because, I don't know, you're seventeen, you're just saying anything that'll get you more approval with whoever's in the room, right? Maybe the quarterback will laugh or maybe the cute girl will laugh. But I have this vivid memory that Belle overheard me one time, it was in the cafeteria, I didn't know she was there till I said what I said, some stupid mean joke about her brace or her hair.

PATRICIA

You always seem to play someone who's outcast so accurately.

GEORGE

Yeah, because I *was* Cooper, I *was* Belle, one layer beneath, that was *totally* who I was going into junior high school... and I don't know, I found the switch that turned me into the popular kid, I flipped that sucker on, it was self-defense I guess, all I was doing was covering up the insecurity, but *man*, I did it well.

And I would get mad at people like them. I was like, "Why can't *they* find that switch and be normal? Am I the only one who's faking everything, every day?"

(Patricia reads another email from Cooper.)

PATRICIA

“June 20, 2002.

“A few weeks ago, I had a super bad dream. I was in sitting a tiny room at the top of an old, old house near the ocean. Outside the window you could see whaling ships out there in the fog. A woman was sitting across from me at a little table beside the window, but she hid her face. She was reaching across the table and tapping my arm with the point of a quill pen from olden times, starting at my hand and working up to my elbow, tapping a line, and every time she tapped I screamed because the point of the quill pen was so hot it burned me. When I woke up, I felt the pennies. My arm was sticking out over the bed and I saw them there, lined up on it. I shook them off me, but I could still feel the burning for a whole minute.

“Sorry I didn’t call back last month, but thanks for checking in. I got 2nd place in the Manchester Expo, which would have been a big deal if I won first. I got beat by a sixteen- year-old kid.

“I can’t believe you’re getting so famous. I have a lot of questions about how they did the effects in *Mission 6860*, ha ha. No effects in that kissing scene with that woman who won the award I bet, ha ha. The critics are stupid, don’t worry about them.”

(On an old recording, we hear audience applause in an auditorium. When it ends, George speaks into a microphone.)

GEORGE

Thank you. I hadn’t seen that movie in a lot of years. This was a tough part, it was over my head, so thank you to Melanie Davis for giving it to me. As usual, my mimicry of better actors got me through it.

On day ten or so of filming I said to Melanie, “I’m so lost. I don’t know who I’m supposed to be.” She said, “Yeah, that’s kind of obvious.” But she said “Every time we start a take, there are twenty people around you on the set, and all of them like you. I like you. When you show up for work here, you’re not alone.

“And that’s so important.”

(Next, it’s Patricia reading again.)

“October 14, 2002.

“Kingsford,

“An interesting visit to Mr. V in regards to Cooper Rabin. Mr. V never comes out of the archives, I found out, so don’t bother trying to coax him. He’s unnaturally intense, the kind of intense I know we need but which frightens me a little. He found a historian in Maine who’d uncovered a book of children’s games published in 1931, some small regional press. One of the games in there was called ‘Market Day.’ It was very simple thing played with exactly eleven pennies on a wooden

board. An adaptation of an old Welsh game; the book even mentions that a woman invented it. She died in 1889, she was a schoolteacher. Absolutely no other biographical information on her can be found, not even a name, according to Mr. V, and I believe him. He believes the repetition of the pattern that Rabin sees means that the spirit is having trouble communicating, and always will; it simply can't push through any more clearly than it has, and this will never stop.

"Not exactly a breakthrough, I know. I have Christa telling me that Rabin is getting more desperate and is on antidepressants now. But I'll be in Albany looking into this business with the Poldrict house, so I'm hoping you'll be able to conference in with him, since it's been more than two months since anyone did.

"The last time we talked, he stopped us in the middle of the conversation. He said, 'I hear something.' He thought he was sensing something in the room at that very moment. Somehow those ten seconds of silence on the line, with three of us listening in a thousand miles away, is the most frightening thing I've experienced in the years I've been doing this. Finally he started talking again. Attached are my notes about his experience with something standing right behind him on a train platform. I would categorize this one as an aggression if only because of the timeline; see if you agree.

"After Albany I'll be needing an operation for my back. I'll be fifty-two in two weeks and all the running around is catching up to me. I may need some months away soon. I'm sorry to let you down.

"Agatha."

GEORGE

I did what I did, which I think of as The Bad Thing, because I *could*. Because it was financially easy, and I thought Cooper was being preyed on, I really did. And you're going to have to help me out with what year this was—it was the year the superhero movie came out. Part of the reason I did that was to keep up some connection between us, because he'd been fading, again, we both were, to be honest. I knew he liked those movies a lot, so we could talk about something. There was no money left in Spectral Korps in the U.S., so he had to go around Europe to make ends meet, and as uncomfortable as he was traveling *here*, I can only imagine how much he hated being in unfamiliar countries. He would leave me a message every six months or so, or send an email, and I would reply.

PATRICIA

How did it start, the Bad Thing?

GEORGE

Just searching the internet for these researcher people he'd hooked up with, trying everything I could think of, but very fast it was all dead ends. And then I thought I noticed a *pattern* to the dead ends, like the dead ends were being manufactured. I never spent any time on the internet if I didn't have to, I didn't know the best way to investigate what these people were doing, I didn't know any of their names—Cooper had accidentally given me one phrase in an email to go by, and that got me farther than I thought, but you ran into dead ends a lot quicker in... what, 2001, 2002.

So I had to hand it over, and a sound guy I knew put me in touch with someone, and when *he* started to strike out he said, "OK, look, if you really want to find these people, you have to get serious." And I said "Yeah, let's get serious." Cooper was never going to help me out, so I kept it all from him.

PATRICIA

How long did it take to find the group?

GEORGE

Couple years. Well, a year and a half, and when they got found, they started to fight back very quickly. I didn't know a lot of what was going on because I had some degrees of separation, but they got aggressive. I just didn't realize how aggressive *my* guy had gotten, I wrote him checks, that was my participation. I said, "The minute it seems like it should be a police thing, we'll go with that," but they were so clever. Their people were *so* clever. Dummy domain names and dummy networks and addresses and fake tax documents and I don't know what else, a lot of technical detail I could never understand. And the next thing I know we're in the middle of this war online with people whose names were still completely cloaked. The more they cloaked themselves and the better they got at it the angrier *I* got, the more convinced I was they were committing a fraud against Cooper. And I thought, "I'm gonna stop this before he winds up in a mental hospital." It was just an extension of high school bullying, what they were doing; this was how I was justifying it.

So then one night me and Michelle and my daughter are in Bethany Beach, this is an ocean town in Delaware. Michelle grew up there so we'd gotten into the habit of going every other summer for about a week or so. Things were very shaky between all of us then, so we made sure we went.

I get a call in the condo, Saturday night, this guy says his name is Maxwell, he's speaking for the people I'd been trying to confront for the last year and a half, his exact words. I have no idea how he got my number. He says, "Please, you need to be aware that we know you're behind the attempt to hack our private network, and before you commit another crime, we are willing to meet with you one time to discuss the problem." And I was like, *Oh my god*.

PATRICIA

Did you know what he was talking about?

GEORGE

I knew what he was talking about. I'm immediately picturing myself in jail because I'd let this go too far. So this Maxwell says, "I am here in Bethany Beach"... please meet me at such and such address in Ocean City, that's just down Route 1, tomorrow at 1 o'clock. He was physically in Bethany Beach, tracking me. I didn't sleep at all, I figured I had to go.

It rained the next day, it was pouring down rain, I tell Michelle I'm gonna go load us up on groceries. The address was in this trailer park in the middle of Ocean City; these are all weekly, monthly rentals because the beach is three blocks away, so go figure how they got such sudden access to one of these dinky trailers you have to book three months in advance.

I knock on the door, I go in, and there's this guy sitting in the trailer. He's this big, stout, muscled, tanned guy, maybe thirty, looks like he just flew in from Santa Monica, hundred dollar haircut. Wearing this green t-shirt, "Ocean City Maryland!" with a frog wearing sunglasses, like he'd bought it that day from Sunations. He shakes my hand, he's completely polite, he's all alone. We

sit down. This is Maxwell. Maxwell's not the head of whatever operation they have going; he says he's down the chain.

He goes, "We have to make something clear. This harassment needs to end today." He says they won't press charges as long as I back off, and he says he hopes I'll be assuaged after I hear him out. I remember that word choice, *assuaged*, so this is not some low-end cloak and dagger guy I'm talking to.

He says—we're sitting there at a table that folds out from the wall in this trailer with the rain pounding down on it—he says, "You have to understand that what we do"—and again, he's not giving me any names—"what we do is incredibly difficult and incredibly expensive and it needs to be done in complete secrecy." There are experts to consult, and evidence to be analyzed, and travel, and greater pains for confidentiality than any military operation, and it all costs money, there's no way around it. He says if I don't believe that their intention is to help my friend, then he will show me something to *make* me believe it. But there is to be not one instance of further prying into them, and if there is *one* further instance, he says, they will know about it, and he opens a folder and he gives me some sheets of paper. They have, whoever these people are, they have documented every search me and the guy I hired ever made for them online in the last six months, it's a printout. Is it factual? I don't know, I assume it is.

So I give him my piece of mind there. I am thoroughly pissed off, I probably went on for ten minutes about Cooper's mental state, and Maxwell, Mr. Universe, is nodding, very polite, very understanding, he knows the whole story but he's not backing down. I'm sitting there thinking he's done this before. And I think I probably pushed too hard, I think I verbally threatened him, because he takes another folder from the seat beside him and he says "OK, I'm going to show this to you so you'll understand us better."

PATRICIA

Do you want to pick this up tomorrow?

GEORGE

No, I'll tell it. He says, "In this folder is everything we know about what your father went through six years after his separation from your mother."

My jaw is hanging there. He says: "We know all of it because he came to us." Now before I even process that this total stranger is talking about my father, my *dead father*, I see that this folder is *this thick*.

My father had been alone in a museum sometime long after the divorce and moving away to Madison, a busy Sunday in a history museum, and he'd been standing near a train car that had once taken prisoners to a slave labor camp in Siberia somewhere, an actual train car that had become an exhibit.

(We hear Patricia reading from a file:)

"Mr. F had been standing there by himself, and he saw people start to come out of the side of the train car: men, women, and children who were dressed in rags like peasants or prisoners. They filed past him slowly without speaking, each looking at his face, and they disappeared down a long hallway that led out of the museum. They never said a word, so Mr. F thought that because of

their authentic appearance, it was part of a strange re-creation. No one else seemed to notice them.

“Late that same night, Mr. F was alone in his apartment when he heard a scratching at his door, like someone was trying to get in or pick the lock without making too much noise. He described feeling feverish, and very afraid. Opening the door, he saw almost two dozen people standing out in the cold. They were the ones he had seen at the museum. He closed the door hurriedly and retreated to his bedroom. But then an hour later, the scratching began again.

“This report continues on page 7. Do not scan or copy. Permission to remove it from the premises must be attained through Kingsford Harvey.”

GEORGE

Four months or so he was supposedly haunted by these people. Sometimes they would come back in the middle of the night. Not knocking; trying to pick their way in. All these small hands. He never told anyone. He just suffered with it.

The museum people were the end of it for him, he couldn't take it, he took a bunch of pills. This was what was in the file.

Maxwell said, “We're trying to save your friend's life. Do you know how extraordinary and unlikely it is that a man, Cooper, who is frequented by a presence, happens to know someone whose father died because of that, the *unbelievable* geographical rarity of that? We're trying to find out what that means, if it means anything. But we're trying to save his life, and not just his. Please, let us try.”

(Now George is by the water.)

GEORGE

It was that night, I remember the water being almost as calm as this, though that was the ocean. There was no one else around on the beach, I was standing there, wondering what I was going to do. Michelle and Olive were in the condo.

I saw something in the sand. It was a circle of tiny objects, embedded in the sand, where the tide had smoothed things out just about perfectly. I went over, and I knew what they were, I knew it. I was counting them as I walked over. Eleven.

I looked up and there was someone standing on the beach, right on the tideline, watching me, a woman. But when I looked back at the sand, the pennies weren't what I thought they were, and there weren't eleven of them, they were shells, some kid had maybe left them there in a circle. And the woman was just, you know, someone out walking. But I was in a cold sweat.

(Elsewhere.)

That was, yeah, 2004. Another long stretch of silence, and then in March of '06 I got another call from Belle, late at night. She was crying, she was trying to calm herself... she was saying, “They

found Cooper... a farmer found him... a goat farm, he was unconscious, he was beaten, the farmer was painting a well and he looked up and Cooper was bleeding, he was staggering, he collapsed..."

(Elsewhere.)

I gotta add something about that night on the beach. The second time I looked over at that woman, sometimes I am convinced that it was a different image, the body type was different, like in five seconds she'd been replaced because I saw something I shouldn't have. I know it doesn't make sense that I would see someone that Cooper had not...

I just thought I'd tell you.

(Elsewhere.)

Cooper had been out walking a trail just before dark, this was in York County, Pennsylvania. And a storm had blown in from out of absolutely nowhere, the sky had become like... he saw four funnels, four distinct funnels above him, completely silent. They had color to them, a strange color. The wind started whipping around, and he started to run, he was trying to find shelter, and then he said here came the pennies. Raining down hard on him. Like being in a tornado. He put his hands over his eyes and he kept going, and they started coming at him from an angle, all angles, like they were being shot at him, thousands of them, he heard them hitting the branches of trees on the way down over the sound of the wind. A branch hit him in the head and he passed out for a few seconds, then he got up and one of the pennies hit his eye socket and it filled up with blood.

So finally I flew out to see him, like more than a week later, it was terrible timing, I was in the middle of the divorce. So that's the actual story of why the play was stopped for a little while, that's the *actual* truth.

I got to the hospital, he'd been recovering for eight or nine days already. I walk in... bruises all over him, his arms, his neck, his face, his legs. Three broken bones, all small ones. Bad concussion. They thought somebody must have jumped him, beaten him, or shot him multiple times with a pellet gun or something small caliber enough to hurt him but not kill him. Or that he had done it to himself, so... psychiatric observation. He never mentioned pennies to anyone. He told them he didn't remember a thing after heading out for a walk.

He filled in a lot of the past for me on that visit. But you know what we talked about too? We talked about movies. We talked about Mrs. Montez, taught shop class, she was a standup comic at night. Cooper was... something had changed. He didn't seem scared, it used to be I could feel it even in the emails or the rare message he would leave me, but now, in the room, even though his hair was prematurely gray, he seemed like he'd been in some kind of horrible wreck but was going to be OK and he just wanted to leave the hospital and go to McDonald's.

I finally said, *I'm glad to see you're calm, man*, and he said, *George, you know what? She hasn't come back*. I said, *Who?* He said, *You know. She's not coming back. I can feel it*.

It had only been what, nine days, but he had this sense that she had burned herself out suddenly—or that it wasn't that she had attacked him in the woods, with the wind and the violence, it was that she was being *pulled away* from him somehow.

And I said, *Yeah, man, I'm sure you're right.* I wanted to give him hope. When I left him he was watching TV, and I thought, If I never see him again... if we just go our separate ways and the link is finally broken... I'm glad that as bad as he looks right now, that he's got that look on his face, like I'd never seen, like it was all over.

That day was seventeen years ago.

(Patricia reads.)

"Kingsford,

"It was good to hear from you. I'm doing well after another ugly procedure on my knee, and I'll be moving in soon with my daughter and her husband.

"I had an interesting experience last month. I got together with four people I went to high school with—the class of '62, now old and gray. We had lunch in a local hangout we all used to go to, which is somehow still there, and we laughed and reminisced. When they asked me about my career, I told them I practiced law, when that hasn't been true since the nineties... but of course I couldn't possibly explain to them what we've been trying to do.

"I've made a decision which may upset you. I think it's time we released all our files, and all our archives, to anyone to who wants them. The entire database, and every communication. There's been enough secrecy and enough subversion. Let the world be shocked for a while, yes, before it realizes how little knowledge we've truly gained in thirty years. We're doing no one any good this way.

"I want to do good.

"Agatha
January 30th, 2020."

(George is in the car again, driving slowly, somewhere peaceful, off-road. He stops, kills the engine, gets out.)

GEORGE

So it's.... this one?

(He begins to walk; we hear his footsteps on gravel throughout the following:)

PATRICIA

On August 28 of this year, George Fordham went to visit the grave of his high school girlfriend and would-be prom date, Lee King, who recently passed away after a long illness. They had never spoken after that night in 1993.

(George continues to walk. As he does so, we hear a montage of differing voices from his past.)

“George: We’re no longer best friends if you’re not coming to Cornell with me, you bum! – Jack Charbonneau.

“I’ll miss the back row of Mr. Lilly’s class and all the times you cheated at Uno! – Mike Katz.

“Always thought you were cute, but not as cute you think you are! – Danica Bell.

“Who will torture the freshmen now? Have a great summer and a great life! – Mark Edelstein.

“Thank you for being an awesome cafeteria buddy and for all those lifts home. Sorry about your loss this year, best of luck at college. – Misha Rhodes.”

(George’s footsteps have crossed from the gravel path to the soft grass. Now he stands still. We hear a light wind.)

GEORGE

This is her.

PATRICIA

Is there anything you wish you could say to her?

GEORGE

No.

PATRICIA

(reading)

“The Fetchess can absorb up to twelve damage points. A player may not have more than one Fetchess in their hand at any time. Because she grows ever stronger until the moment when her strength burns away entirely, she can absorb up to four damage in any combat’s final round instead of two. She cannot be chained into combat for at least one turn after recruitment into a clan containing either a Litch or Heavenly Sentinel.”

(George reads from a last letter.)

GEORGE

“August 20, 2021.

“Dear George,

“Hi, it’s Belle. It was so great to hear from you. I thought I’d take the time to tell you everything that happened since the last time we talked. I can’t believe it’s been almost seventeen years.”

(As George continues to read, his narration crosses with, and segues into, Patricia's.)

PATRICIA

"After Cooper settled back into his routine, he wasn't bothered anymore by the presence. It was just like he thought. Something had happened. We didn't talk all the time, just gamed online mostly, but I could tell he was so relieved. After a while we kind of tried to date again, finally, but then things got tougher. He couldn't make any more money from Spectral Korps—it had gotten replaced by other things long ago—so he had to find work, and he'd never really had a real job before, so that was a tough adjustment. He moved back here, just a few blocks from his old house on Wiggins Road, and got an apartment, because I sort of begged him to try.

"He did different things for a couple of years, but he didn't like any of them. Then it was more than that. He got more and more sad. I tried to talk to him about it, like I always did, but he was pretty closed off. It took me a long time to figure him out, and I needed help to do it. Finally I actually got in touch with the man who had done so much research into everything, a guy named Maxwell, and he filled in some pieces. He was very nice and very helpful.

"By that time, I didn't know if Cooper was going to make it. His depression got real bad and I just didn't understand. He had this new lease on life and I didn't see why he didn't get the possibilities.

"But you have to realize, when what happened to him stopped so suddenly, he *lost* something too. Since he was eighteen he'd been under its control, which was awful... but for years and years it was a form of companionship to someone who had none. And it was companionship he didn't have to respond to, or return.

"One time, he told me about a day when he was twenty-five or so, swimming up at the water park in East Hillside. He liked to scoop up water in his cap and dump it over his head, and this one time he was standing in the water and he did that... and along with the water, pennies fell out of his cap onto his head. And he *laughed*.

"As terrible as what he went through was, when the presence went away, without him ever knowing why, it was a different kind of pain.

"If no one believes that, *I* believe that. I've *been* that lonely.

"He didn't know if maybe he had done something to cause the end, maybe even caused her—yes, I do say *her*—to reject him. It was the loss of something that had been truly close, and predictable, and belonged to him.

"So he had to figure out who he was, he had to find a different identity to be whole. And there really hadn't been much of a Cooper all along to build from.

"I thought he would disappear or die, I really did. But I never stopped trying with him. That's one thing I've always been good at. Persistence. It's how I got the job in the cash office down at the store.

"I stayed with him. It took years, but he started to figure out who he was going to be. He found a job he liked, at a golf course. And he stopped shutting down from me. He realized that responding to someone's attention wasn't going to destroy him. Rejection wouldn't either.

“Guess what? We are still together.

“I want you to know that when Cooper talks about you, he always talks about the night you let him teach you Spectral Korps. To him that’s a magical memory. He remembers everything you both said to each other, and how you drove him home from Cupatello’s. That’s how simple life can be, I guess. He thinks of you as a great friend.

“I see from Wikipedia that you gave up acting, and anything to do with it, a few years ago ... so maybe you’re figuring out who *you’re* going to be next too. If that’s true, I hope it all goes your way. It’s never too late.

“Write us anytime.

Belle.”

GEORGE

Thank you, Belle.

No... not too late. Not even close.

surveillance

My name is Roddy Post. If anyone ever asks what was the strangest thing that ever happened to me in the relatively uneventful decade I spent as a private investigator, I have an easy answer. Year after year of tediously gathering evidence for court cases, looking for missing people, conducting surveillance on unfaithful spouses... and then came August 4th, 2017. This small, pale woman of about forty named Angela McCrail walked into my office, sat down, and asked me almost first thing if I was permitted to carry a weapon. She wasn’t quite sure who to turn to for what she needed, and she was afraid that if she asked the wrong person, she would get into very deep trouble. She folded her hands calmly on the lap of her suit, a very expensive-looking business suit, and looked at me intently with her cold blue eyes.

The name McCrail gave me an association right off the bat. It was true—this Angela was the estranged daughter of Wilhoit McCrail, whose grieving grandfather back in 1917 took a \$3000 settlement in the maritime negligence lawsuit against the White Star Line, the company that operated the *Titanic*, and started a gourmet chocolate business that eventually grew into a multi-million-dollar operation. I’d read about Wilhoit’s death in the paper the night before. Age seventy-one, no cause of death given.

I want to pay you three times your normal fee to do one simple thing for me with no questions asked, his daughter said to me that morning in August. After my father's funeral, I want you to stay the night outside his crypt and make sure he doesn't come out of it. If he does, I want you to shoot him and confirm to me that you did. I am not prepared to answer any questions about my reasons for this request. Not a single one.

Now, eleven years in the business had taught me to expect bizarre cases, so you shouldn't be surprised that I agreed immediately to Ms. McCrail's terms. About once every three or four months, almost like clockwork, I'd get a request that was totally irrational, usually precipitated by emotional distress, anger, jealousy... I always took the money. All I can say is that giving people what they need to feel better about their screwed-up lives briefly during a period of interior chaos is not the worst crime in the world, you know what I mean?

Angela McCrail left my office a half hour later, after signing the usual papers. Nothing in them was about shooting a dead man risen from his crypt, I assure you.

I don't know. Am I a bad person for not turning that woman away, refusing her money, maybe getting in touch with her few living relatives to warn them that she obviously needed professional help, and fast? What was my responsibility there, really?

Can you tell me that?

(A scratchy audiotape. An old man speaks into a handheld recorder:)

This house is cold all the time, I don't know what it is.

I don't know what it would feel like to someone coming in from the outside.

I think a cat got in. I can only hear it when I'm in this room. It got up in the eaves somewhere. I think it followed me back in last week.

So now it's me and the cat.

How do you stop this thing?

Two days after my meeting with Angela, I watched, covertly, the surprisingly small, surprisingly simple funeral of master chocolatier and businessman Wilhoit McCrail from the corner of St. Florian's Cemetery in Prospect Harbor, Maine. The man's crypt was a pretty modest one, but its position in the cemetery beside a cliff overlooking the Atlantic—that was striking. During the ceremony, these warm winds blew in from the sea and sometimes the words of the priest were lost to me, but I wasn't there to be emotionally moved. I was busy pondering the layout of the cemetery and where I could keep out of sight from early evening till dawn the next day, while always keeping an eye on the thin black gates of that crypt, as requested by my client.

Historic St. Florian's was hilly and open, no fencing around it, even a little overgrown and wild like a lot of old northeastern cemeteries. When all the mourners, including Angela McCrail, were gone and the sky began to darken, I was surprised to feel a little creeped out by the surroundings. That marble crypt, silent against the backdrop of the icy sea... I was *not* looking forward to this task. Even the sky was against me, I swear, so bleak, my grandmother would have said it looked like old gray blankets were piling up there so the world could take a nap.

Triple my usual fee, just remember that.

I'd parked a full mile down the road, and by the time dark came completely I was in position. I was sitting with my back against a big tombstone with the name Strauss on it. Below me on the grass was a woolen blanket folded over multiple times to help just a little with the bumpiness. I had a thermos full of coffee beside me, and I was safely out of the line of sight of this stony lane that wound from Clark Point Road into the cemetery. Maybe Angela McCrail would check on me, maybe she wouldn't. She'd assured me—with some nervousness I thought—that she had no intention of doing so. But I would keep my part of the bargain, oh yes. That's the way I worked. I even had my gun on me, tucked deep inside my jacket. But of course, it was *not* loaded.

So yeah, there I sat. I didn't even get up to stretch until well after dark. I had nothing to do but think. You have to have a strategy to stay at the right level of alertness on a stakeout; I make lists of things to think about, problems to be puzzled through. And so I thought about what I'd found out during my brief personal research into Wilhoit McCrail—which his daughter knew nothing about. Come on, do you really think I wasn't going to look into these people?

I hadn't found out anything about Wilhoit McCrail that was too out of the ordinary for someone of his age and experience among the wealthy and influential. Intelligent, resourceful, a little mercurial, disliked intensely by two ex-wives but much loved, apparently, by his first, though she'd been dead for twenty years. An extensive traveler. Described as some by mysterious, even secretive, prone to long periods of aggravating absence from the company he mostly had others run for him. Then one day, ten years before he died, he just dropped out of the business. Took his money, withdrew into his estate, and never really showed much of himself anymore. There were plenty of photos of him out there. He looked so normal, except... he never seemed to smile. Never.

As for his daughter Angela, she lived alone and had nothing to do with her father's business or his money. The history there was very murky indeed. She was a respected CPA. No apparent history of mental instability.

There was one curious thing I found out about McCrail through my connection at the municipal police. He'd been arrested two years before for trespassing. He was found just walking on a private farm a couple miles from his mansion on West Bay, almost a full mile off the nearest road, at three in the morning. There was a police report filled out, but it went nowhere. The property owners had decided not to press charges. Paid off, maybe. No mention of intoxication. He was just.... out.

I checked a couple of maps and I saw that he'd only been about fifty yards from a fence that separated this big lonely farm from a senior memory care complex run out of an old prep school donated to the state. I recognized the name of it. The place had been in the news a year before because they'd lost two residents in six months, they'd just gone missing. It happens, you know, memory care.

No report in the paper about McCrail's arrest, which told me that yeah, someone had gotten some money to keep it quiet. Weird.

So you want me to spend all night watching the crypt, and act only if he climbs from his coffin and walks out of there. That's what I'd said to his daughter, I really ached my completely neutral, nonjudgmental tone.

She had this posture there in my chair like someone had told her that if she let her shoulders relax for one second she'd turn to salt. She said, *Yes. That is exactly what I want. Stay well away from the crypt itself. The gates are locked, but his coffin is not, as per the very specific instructions he left to his executors upon his death.* Not once did she break eye contact. In accordance with her conditions, I pursued no further details from her. How's *that* for self-control? I needed the money, you see. I had debts.

I had all the time in the world to stare at that crypt that night, until it became nothing more than a vague silhouette. The wind got chilly and the sounds of the sea seemed to get louder. Behind the black gates there was an iron door, also shut tight. Beyond that... well, I assumed just the coffin in the center of a very small, windowless sepulchre.

The hours began to pass. By that time I was a veteran of too many stakeouts to count, so I had plenty of mental gymnastics in the bank to get me through till eight a.m. without dozing. But I found myself thinking of some very foolish things, letting my mind get corrupted by absurd images. I thought about Angela McCrail sitting alone in her big house, staring out her window, thinking crazy thoughts about her dead father, however they had come to be. And I thought about reading spooky comic books as a kid, and how an artist would draw the images that she was probably thinking about. The iron door opening, and a bony male hand emerging through the crack, fingers long and discolored. Maybe tiny red eyes peering out through the shadows. The gates being parted, and some letterer drawing the word *creaaaaaak*, in shaky lines, with seven a's probably, to visually express the sound. And then... a shape with almost no definition stepping out onto the grass.

Great stuff for a seven-year-old, but nothing more. I remember thinking I had reached the absolute bottom of my career, and that I would be out of this line of business by year's end. Enough was enough. Back to selling industrial washing machines to hotel chains, maybe.

I am honestly baffled by why I was so sleepy by midnight, I really am, to this day. Well... not exactly *sleepy*; that's not quite the right word. I just seemed to be... fading. Slipping into a semi-consciousness. It was like when I get the flu every few years and get a temperature so high that my head starts to swim and my thoughts slip off track and get stuck in a repetitive groove. I swear I spent at least an hour mentally rearranging the letters of Wilhoit McCrail's name into different words. And eventually, maybe sometime around two, my eyes closed for a while. I imagined a tall twisting shape, like a mist, swirling around inside that crypt forty yards away. Swirling, and swirling, then becoming something like a man.

But no, that didn't seem right for some reason. Didn't seem right. Instead I thought about stubby fingers without flesh, scratching on the inside of the coffin lid, too weak to make anything happen, but then... getting stronger and stronger, more and more insistent.

Never once in my career had I failed in a stakeout situation. Always staying awake and locked in had been a point of pride. It reminds me of my college girlfriend; she was in a school play, and she had to rehearse this one scene over and over and over again all day, it was a big crying scene, she

had to make herself cry again and again. And just before dark that day she got this phone call. Her mother had collapsed and died. And she couldn't cry, she had no tears when she needed them the most.

I don't know, maybe that has nothing to do with me. Maybe I was just far more tired that night than I realized. I was so tired I even forgot about my thermos of coffee; how could that just slip my mind? I know I was still awake at about quarter past three, but after that, I was simply ... out.

(Wilhoit McCrail is heard again, speaking into his recorder.)

I'm not telling you all anything about *anything*.

You want to entertain your suspicions about me? *You do the travelling I did, and you spend the years and the money yourself.*

You spend your *own* marrow. In those caves and those tunnels.

I'm not using this tape to give you all an education.

And let me tell you something about Angela. She's a little *cow* who should have locked in the basement and never let out.

The next thing I knew, I was being shaken awake. More like jolted. Two hands on my shoulders, fingers digging deep into my overcoat, rocking me violently. My eyes flew open and squinted away the daylight seeping over the ocean, it was so soft and lovely and blue. Someone was kneeling in front of me and shouting. No, *screaming*.

It was Angela McCrail. I'd only seen her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail, and now it was loose and wild and obscuring her face. She wore an old gray topcoat over a sweatshirt and pajama bottoms. Her voice roared above me.

"You fell asleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep!" she screamed, and slapped me hard across the cheek. She repeated those three words over and over again. I staggered to my feet and tried to ward off her blows, but they kept coming and coming until her fists were balled up and she was just swinging wildly, tears coursing down her cheeks, her eyes wide and savage. *"You fell asleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep!"*

Finally I lashed out myself, I shoved her backwards. She fell to the ground and immediately got up again, panting; she was literally clawing at her cheeks with panic and rage and fear. She looked up at the sky then, like she was having a moment of horrible realization, like there was nothing left to be done, and she let out this long, pained, wavering baying. I backed away from her. When her vocal cords were totally shot, she took off running toward the cliff. She had these cheap white sneakers on and you could hear the wet squelch with every footstep. The morning fog began to swallow her up. I just stood there, watching, and when she was ten yards away from the cliff, I realized the worst was about to happen.

She got to the very edge... and then she flung herself outwards, vanishing into the fog. Her small form was taken away. I never heard a sound as she dropped toward the waves, those turbulent waves of the Atlantic far below, the surf rolling in and rolling back from jagged rocks tall as a man.

She was gone. Just like that. Whether it was suicide or an accidental act that came from unhinged madness and terror, I'll never know.

I was alone in the cemetery again. My right cheek was bleeding from where Angela McCrail's fingernails had caught me, and my left ear was ringing from the contact with her fist. Finally, I turned and looked in the direction of the crypt.

She must have dragged him out, the police said to me later. They figured that in the few hours after I fell asleep, she'd had time to take the corpse virtually anywhere. Maybe she'd even pushed him over the cliff, only to follow herself soon after.

They never found either one of the bodies, you see. It wouldn't have taken more than a few minutes for the whirlpools below the cliff to pull either one of them out to sea.

I said to them, *Yeah... yeah, but what about... no fingerprints on the open gates, or the unbolted iron door, or the lid of the coffin? What about no footprints leading up to it or back from it? What about those instructions McCrail gave to his executors?*

No answer from them except when you take away the impossible... et cetera, et cetera.

(The final Wilhoit McCrail tape is heard.)

When I was in high school, we used to say, "I'm going creeping tonight." It meant being out after dark, drinking or something, and your parents didn't know where you were. So you'd say... "I'm going creeping out by the dam with Jennifer Heplen."

Doesn't mean what it sounds like.

I don't like words like that.

"Here I am, Jenniferrrrr... Give me a kisssss..."

(We hear a cat on the tape, mewling angrily from somewhere inside the ceiling. McCrail cackles.)

So there it is. The story of my final stakeout, botched like I was a giggly intern. I own a Honda dealership now: more paperwork, far fewer moral dilemmas.

Oh, I followed up. Trust me. On my own. Quietly. But I never found the answer I was looking for. I could never say definitely what Wilhoit McCrail may have been. Finally I decided there was one word that would suffice so I could just put it behind me, kind of a catch-all word that brings to mind cemeteries and fog, and missing people, and broken tombs, and that word was: *ghoul*.

(Now the narrator speaks on his own recorder:)

Anyway. I'm not using this tape to give you all an education. It's just very late, and I think I'm just feeling bad tonight about back then.

(Somewhere behind him, a door creaks slowly open.)

Hello? Someone there?

(He rises, leaves the room... and eventually does return.)

I guess it's nobody.

Stay away from me, McCrail. I have no fight with you. Remember, that gun wasn't even loaded.

panophobe

I *told* you, Stevitch, not to scare me, or tease me, or bait me, I *told* you I was nervous about going out there alone and I could do without the innocent insinuations about what was hiding, waiting. This is the thing with people, they think those teases are so innocent. I shouldn't have to explain to them that I'm susceptible, they need to just understand how I am. *You* needed to understand how I am. But you made no effort.

It should have been an adventure, the first real adventure of my life, but from day one I was on edge. That sky, that sky was somehow the worst part of it, I just wasn't ready for how *big*. When you take away all the buildings and the hills I feel comfortable in, that sky just gets bigger and bigger, and I didn't like the way I could see too much of the land; in that part of the country there's nothing blocking the horizon, so when you're out there and you look in every direction the land just stretches and stretches, and you can walk east, west, north, south, and nothing will impede you, until you disappear somewhere on the horizon, who knows how far away that point really is.

You've never even *been* there, Stevitch, so you wouldn't even know what it's like when you're on the plain and thunder clouds roll in all around, and you've never felt more exposed, like the sky is a bully, it's the enemy.

I can't believe I left you a message about the first thing that went wrong, of course you *would* call it an omen. A dead snake on the path, between the tall rocks. First hour. How you would have laughed when I took out the knife I'd bought from Walden Outdoors. *Give me the biggest, sharpest one* I'd said to the clerk. I know he was snickering. I used it to turn the snake over to see its markings.

And that night... the campsite on my map just wasn't there, it just wasn't *there*, so I had worries for my direction and wound up sleeping a mile away from the nearest other hikers. I could just hear your voice, Stevitch, I knew what you'd whisper in the dark, kneeling outside my tent: *You know what killed that snake, dontcha? The beast is out there.* I deleted your email with all the video links as soon as I opened it, did you really think I'd watch them? With titles like *Monster of myth caught on camera* and *They thought the creature was a legend and then they looked up.* Damn you for sending those to me!

I had nightmares. I could have turned back, but I didn't. I kept going. The first few days, I tried to stay close to other people, strangers, but the spaces between got bigger. And the next thing that went against me was the sun, there was no sun, it vanished, day after day, any little comfort was denied me.

I heard sounds in the middle of the night at the first waypoint inside Corrisode National Park. Just on the other side of a stream. It sounded like some big snorting animal and it was choking on something, for a whole minute, then there was quiet, then the sound of it struggling to swallow something down... until it succeeded.

No sleep, no sleep at all. I sat up with the knife in my lap, watching. In the desert it never gets fully dark, so I could always see the shapes of the hills.

Twelve sightings in the last twelve months, that's what you told me. Only three in five years before that! I never would have believed it if it hadn't been for that story in that magazine. My boss played me the audio those monks recorded out there, played it for me in his office. *You're really going out there next month?* he said.

I had to. Just one time, to prove to myself I'm not scared of everything.

You're halfway there, I kept telling myself that Sunday. All the thrill of adventure was gone already, I was counting the miles and the hours. It began to get real hilly. Someone cruel had painted a pair of eyes on the rocks in the ravine north of Cobb. Why would they do that except to scare someone hiking by.

It was around dusk of that night that I knew I would be chosen, it was going to happen to me. Just like you joked about, Stevitch. I was looking at a paper bag stuck on a piece of cactus and it came to me. All the signs, they were building. The thing in the desert and me, on a course to come together. Just like some guy on an airplane before takeoff convinced it's gonna crash because he's so afraid of flying, and it *does*, that's how he dies. This was how I was gonna die. No point in going back along the trail, it was just as long as going forward.

This is what you all did, with your videos and your articles, you made me believe in some monster I should have stopped believing in when I was ten. Ridiculous faked footage on 8-millimeter, scratchy audio, unreliable witnesses, it didn't matter. The beast was out there, and it was gonna kill me. It was going to kill me.

I stopped texting my sister, she always wanted to know if I was OK. And all the omens, they kept mounting. The birds disappeared. I saw footprints crossing the trail at the fourth waypoint. I couldn't prove that's what they were, but they were enormous. Misshapen. Not shoe or boot prints. The lack of sleep began to mess with my vision and I was staggering. Couldn't get enough water, never enough.

It was almost funny, how calm I was when I realized I was lost. I'd been on the parallel lake trail for thirty-six hours. It wound through the slippery gorge where only the more experienced hikers went. I wasn't prepared for it, didn't have the supplies to make it to Cobb. Even you would have stopped mocking me then, Stevitch, you would see how dangerous that was—or maybe you wouldn't stop, maybe you'd hide behind one of those thousands of tall rocks shaped like coffins and make sounds like the thing on that recording, or wait till I was in my tent, wide-eyed, like a zombie, and you'd call out in the dark *It's drawn to terrain like this. Zoologists say the cave system here is where it would probably live!*

I hate you, Stevitch. Personal trainer. Why did I let you into my life?

I made it to the final day, somehow. Hadn't seen anyone for twelve hours. No choice but to leave the gorge and try to get to the highway outside Cobb, just walk and walk and hope the humidity didn't put me down. Half a day I walked through the rain, terrified the lightning I saw cutting up the sky was getting closer. I imagined what part of my body the beast, the hairy beast would lash out at to make the killing wound. My neck, maybe. Dying with my carotid spraying the rocks and the red dirt with blood.

I was in the open desert then. I saw something up ahead. Power lines. Then some kind of shantytown, there on the plain. I was safe.

But no. It wasn't what it seemed. It was a museum. A fake mining town, constructed for tourists. \$3 adults, \$1 children. Closed. No cars anywhere, people had to park a half mile away and get on a bus.

I came up on it from the south, the opposite side of the highway so far away. I climbed a fence, and I walked that little grid of manufactured streets. The apothecary, the music hall, the jail, the schoolhouse. Unpainted wood and rusting signs. Sometimes lovingly detailed, but mostly a cheap effort. An authentic old derrick loomed over it all. Lifeless weeds sprouting up through cracks in floorboards.

This way to the cemetery, a sign said, and it pointed into this corrugated aluminum tunnel a hundred feet long, that snaked and bent toward... well, I thought it was a garden. There were lights strung up inside.

I went in, Stevitch. Do you believe me, that I had that kind of courage? Skinny planks leading deeper and deeper. I stopped halfway through.

Don't turn around, I thought. *That was something growling.*

I heard it running toward me then, along the planks, and my entire body was pulled backward when the paw took hold of my backpack and yanked. Completely off balance I stumbled backward and went down hard, facing the ceiling. My backpack was completely torn away, gone, and before I saw the face above me, made dark by my concussion and the obscuring halo of a forty-watt bulb, my hand had already gone to my hip and grabbed the knife, the biggest one they had in the store, the one you told me would do no one any good against a beast that strong. But on that point, Stevitch, you were wrong.

Am I coward now, Stevitch? Ten thousand dollars to own what's in the bag. Five thousand to touch it. One thousand just to look.

A Bitter Pill

PRINCE

I'm going to tell you a story you'll never, ever believe. How much detail do you really need, since you'll never buy any of it?

(Engine sounds.)

At half past one in the morning on June 6th, 2027, we drove the big blue van five miles east of the Kaskin River and stopped on a quiet road near a shuttered convenience store.

(The engine is silenced.)

Amplas and I went around to the back and opened the rear doors.

(Door opens, sounds of weight shifting. Prince whispers "That's his foot, that's his foot!")

We guided the man in there down to the ground, and walked him carefully over to a bench near some power lines, keeping an eye out for headlights. The man was barely awake. In another twenty minutes or so, he'd be fully alert.

We got back in the van, cruised fifty yards forward, and parked under a streetlight. At 2:05, the man rose and began to walk down the road toward the lights of a trailer park and a sleepy strip of body shops, feed stores, and fast food joints.

I'll never forget what Amplas said in the passenger's seat as we sat there smoking, watching, finally putting the van in Drive again to follow:

AMPLAS

Do your worst, maniac.

What did I know then, what did I know then about Project Horseman? They kept everyone in the dark as much as they could. That's just sound policy. Amplas and I simply followed orders. Everything was on a need-to-know basis. For a long time I didn't even know the man we were taking out to Lothian every two weeks was anything more than a code word: *Shifter*.

It was a different era, you have to understand. The world was on the brink. The Defense Department needed the nydron bomb developed far, far quicker than anyone conceived. The Post-Axis Powers had suddenly re-aligned and the threats were real. There was panic through the whole country. Defcon had been at 2 for months. Extraordinary measures were called for.

(Van engine running, cruising slowly.)

AMPLAS

I don't like this; he's not going the way he usually goes.

PRINCE

It's not a problem.

AMPLAS

This ankle holster is itching me like crazy. It doesn't do that to you?

PRINCE

You know what Vorhoven told me yesterday?

AMPLAS

If he told you *anything*, that's an insane violation of protocol.

PRINCE

He told me what happened in the lab to that girl that time wasn't an accident. He said Shifter stabbed her.

AMPLAS

Jesus. Stop talking. I told you before, I don't wanna know.

Whoa, whoa... why is he walking *away* from town?

Speed up a little. I'm getting a bad vibe here.

So... there was this man. He was not quite well-known in scientific circles. More of a rumor. Beyond brilliant. A generational mind, apparently. Where I and Amplas worked, he was referred to only as "Doctor H." The kind of genius that can change the way people see things, or change the world with their inventions. The problem was that in addition to having an IQ of 220 and an understanding of physics and chemistry beyond mortal comprehension, he was... well, I'm going to use the word psychopath, because I'm not sure what other word there is. But the nydron bomb.... that was the thing he could likely provide that no one else on Earth could. Something so ingenious, but so intricate and complex, that only he truly knew how it could work.

So for three years the Defense Department gave him a lab outside Denver and as many assistants as he needed. They all threatened to quit within their first month unless they could work with Doctor H. only remotely. No one was prepared for that man's personality type. Secretive. Cryptic. Profane. Hostile. Aggressive. Numbers and formulas were real to him, humans were not. Unlike most sociopaths or narcissists, he didn't seem to have an act he put on to hide his true intentions. His intentions were *all* bad, *all* the time. Sometimes he spat at people who approached him and clawed at his own arms if the staff was late with his meals. And then there was what he did to that girl...

I guess you have to understand what a Stressed-Stent brain is to begin to see the Defense Department's reasoning in placing a call to the CIA two years after the bomb research began, when

Doctor H withdrew into a silent shell, communicating with no one, not lifting a finger to further his vital research.

I'd never even *heard* of a Stressed-Stent brain. Soon enough, I'd be looking into the eyes of a man who, like maybe one in ten million people in the world, possessed one.

(Van engine running, cruising slowly.)

AMPLAS

Pull over here.

(The van now just idles.)

AMPLAS

Is that a garbage can he's picking through?

PRINCE

No, it's a ... I don't know what that is.

AMPLAS

He's never done anything like that before.

He just took something out of that box and he's got it in his hand; did you see that?

AMPLAS

Yeah.

PRINCE

You know, we can't let him get too close to the bridge. That's Cedarhampton over there.

AMPLAS

I *know*. That's exactly where he's walking, too. Okay, leave the van here, let's get on our feet, come on.

(They open their doors.)

Before he went virtually catatonic in April of that terrible year, Doctor H had begun to play little "games" there in the lab in Denver. Nat Wells told me how he drove out there to deliver some files and he tripped over a string tied low to the floor and was instantly smothered by a box full of mutilated rats which had been set to fall on top of him.

Here was the creepiest thing about Doctor H: Once in a while, he would just... go dark. I mean, he would stop talking, stop bathing, sleep for hour upon hour, withdraw deeper and deeper into his own world. He could stay that way for days.

It took something very specific for him to emerge into the land of the conscious again. *Very* specific.

Doctor H. stabbed the girl in the lab on the same day that the President, absolutely pressed to the wall by North Korea, gave the order to present to the Joint Chiefs of Staff whatever plans for the nydron bomb were already in existence. To this day, I'm sure the President had no idea what Doctor H. truly was, or the extent to which his darkest aspects were being coddled and entertained.

That was when that old war hawk Nat Wells went into full panic mode. Based on H's sudden spectacular increase in output right after the stabbing and a couple of his other little "games," as he supposedly called them, his case came under the top secret review of an eminent psychiatrist named Stuker. Stuker studied H's behavioral patterns over the years, beginning when charges of malicious destruction were brought against him in Oregon after shooting a leopard at the zoo.

Stuker realized that after outbursts of violence, H's scientific proclivity and productivity went through the roof. Drugs could calm the man, and responsible parties had prescribed them for him for more than a decade. But they inevitably deadened his mind and his gifts. Had he not been covertly hired by the government, no doubt he wouldn't have been able to support himself anywhere for very long despite all his damn degrees.

What really made him different though, was that his brain slowed to a crawl if the medications denied him an outburst for too long. It wasn't enough, you see, for H. to look forward to the day when his nydron bomb would annihilate countless people without radiation's after-effects. He craved physical violence and confrontation *now*. Seeing H. crouching in the corner of the lab, unwilling to move or speak even as he seemed so close to delivering the bomb's final plans, spurred Wells into drastic action. His rationale was that the fate of the world might well hang in the balance.

So yeah, the CIA did their best to handle the situation... but in the end, the CIA called *us*.

(Sound of the wind.)

AMPLAS *(out of breath)*

I think he went toward that motel over there--if he's still intending to hunt, that would make sense. I don't think he got to the bridge; there was just no time. You go down that alley, I'll go this way, and we'll meet up. If we don't find him in fifteen minutes, I say we call in. I mean, we lost him, it was guaranteed to happen at some point.

Dammit, I *told* him, I *told* Avellini we needed more direction on this!

A Stressed-Stent brain, Dr. Stuker once explained to my superior, is like a balloon inflated beyond its capacity, but it can't simply snap and release all its energy. Doctor H's mind was that balloon. It needed release. It needed release in the form of destruction. The Horseman Project couldn't reach its goal without him, and so.... something was arranged. One dark day, H. apparently made some very interesting demands, and while they were initially shut down flat, somehow they were eventually agreed to. They say Stuker was the one who recommended it, but I don't know.

Take him out, was the order I got one middle of the night. There's a place where he can roam, he can do what he needs to do, and then bring him back. Watch from a distance but don't intercede. Don't interact with him beyond the necessary. He'll be drugged when you take him out there. He'll be very calm when he comes back out. If there are witnesses, intimidate them but don't hurt them. If he's caught... wait for my call.

At first Amplas and I figured H. would just burn something down, maybe. We were wrong. His hunts, which we drove him to every three weeks or so, were different than that. I'll never figure out who decided on Lothian as the place to take him. It was real quiet at night there, that was for sure. Nothing was open past ten, but like in every poor, backwater town that consists of a single intersection and little else, there was always *someone* out on the street, some drunk or wandering soul, someone who wouldn't be missed if they were... dispatched.

H. always did it with his hands. And nobody saw. Ever. He was sane enough to know how not to be seen. And my superior was right: He did come back calm. *Real* calm. Sleepy, even. Until the night he got away from us, he never showed one sign that he wanted to do anything but commit a single hideous crime and then submit to the van again, driven back under cover of darkness to the lab to work on his machine that would murder on an infinitely larger scale.

Here's what I really think, though: Doctor H's fades into near-catatonia weren't real. I've looked into his eyes, you see. And I think he was always acting all along. That's how evil he truly was.

So now the story sounds utterly, over-the-top insane, doesn't it. But it really happened.

(The van is moving faster now, at about thirty miles per hour, as Amplas speaks into a phone.)

AMPLAS

Dennis, we have a problem, we lost track of Shifter. We're a mile outside Lothian. He obviously had some kind of plan; we think he stashed some car keys and now he's got them. Probably took them from someone he killed last time, or the time before. We're in the van now.

I *know* how close Cedarhampton is; just get some guys over there to sentry the bridge; we're still crawling Lothian.

I don't want to *hear* it right now!

What do you mean.... *what* peace accord?

We're not out here checking the news on our *phones*, you understand?!

Yes. Shifter, Doctor H, had gotten some car keys, to an old Volvo wagon. But Amplas was wrong about where he got them. He did *not* take them off the assistant manager of Lothian's suffering duckpin bowling alley when he'd snapped that man's neck behind a sewing supply store at three a.m. Snapped his neck and then... beaten him with something very very badly, even after he was

dead. I read that in the paper, because I sure as hell didn't watch: there had been many post-mortem wounds.

The keys had come from somewhere unknown. You have to understand, a lot of foreign governments were interested in Doctor H's services. Governments, or other organizations like mine whose names weren't spoken much. That's what I think happened. They maybe promised him something more rewarding than an occasional midnight kill. I can only imagine what that would have been. Maybe something that I know that Wells considered briefly. A room of Doctor H's own, underground, unseen, where people could be brought... something that could just be hosed out when the man was done.

Avellini sent many, many men out to Lothian the night Doctor H. got away from us. There was no way he could have gotten back over the bridge without being intercepted. But he was more clever than that. We eventually found the car at 4 a.m., in the parking lot of a Walgreen's in Shady Grove, eight miles north of the river. The keys were still in it.

Doctor H. had left a note in the front seat, scrawled on the back of a bookmark with cute kittens on the front of it. The note said only this: *Ha Ha*. When I saw those words, Amplas spoke just one of her own into her cellphone:

AMPLAS

Breakdown.

Doctor H was gone... and he has never resurfaced. When I go over the timeline of that night in my head, my mind still boggles—and trembles—over how he managed to find the minutes to give himself one more little reward before vanishing forever.

NEWSCASTER

Coolidge County police are still searching for answers in the case of the tragic motel fire that claimed seven lives in the earliest hours of June 6th. The Rest Nook Inn on Route 2 just west of the state line was burned to the ground through a deliberate act of arson, said Coolidge County sheriff Marta Gates, and she reiterated her plea for witnesses or those with more information about the fire to come forward. The state coroner's office has determined that at least two of the victims endured postmortem and redundant stab wounds...

That was all nine years ago. God knows how many people a man like Doctor H can kill in nine years. Amplas teaches calligraphy now.

I tell you all this because I think you need to know how far certain people in power are willing to go. They called it "protecting the country." What would *you* call it?

Anyway, that's my story of why you've never heard of a bomb fifty times deadlier than any ever invented. I think if Doctor H. is still alive, he has its final pieces still locked away in his brain, playing his little games. But it wouldn't surprise me if someone at some point just took him out.

And if you don't believe the story because it sounds so implausible ... well, friend, I'm not real sure what world you think you live in.

sugary

Steffy was only working at Stydenstrauer's Donuts because she wanted to buy a Microsoft Zune before she went off to college in the fall. Steffy was a techie, and the Microsoft Zune was allegedly going to be the digital music player that wiped the iPod off the map. Stydenstrauer's was a lousy enough place to make money anyway, but it was made worse because she could only get the overnight shift, ten to six. The shop was all the way out on Greencob Road and nobody came in that late. She would have maybe five customers all night, but old Mr. Stydenstrauer believed in tradition, so the overnight shift stayed. All the donuts were more stale than even normal by then.

The biggest problem for Steffy, though, was a customer named Mr. Pruzelius. He was even older than Mr. Stydenstrauer and tiny and hunched over, with weirdly long strands of hair going down to the collar of his coat. He would come in every three nights or so, and he always wanted to buy whatever donuts were left on the racks. All of them, every single one. But he didn't want anything that was *not* a donut. So no turnovers, no bear claws, and certainly not any Lemon Gertners, which were generally considered by everyone in the area to be the worst thing Stydenstrauer's sold, now entering their fiftieth year of being scorned by the customers. Steffy would put all the donuts—only a few dozen were left by the time Mr. Pruzelius hobbled in at about three a.m.—into floppy cardboard boxes, give the old man a twenty percent discount, and off he would go with a weird smile. Steffy didn't like being alone with him in the shop, which was always the case. Hutchy, the sullen teenager who made the donuts, was long gone by the time she came in for her shift, and the two early evening cashiers left at eleven.

One time Steffy finally asked Mr. Pruzelius what he did with all these donuts. "I was wondering when you'd ask me that," he'd said, grinning. "Who doesn't like a donut?"

That didn't seem like much of an answer to Steffy. When she told him she'd be glad to throw in the last of the turnovers, bear claws, and Lemon Gertners into a floppy box for free since no one had any use for them at three in the morning, he shook his old head.

"Oh no," he said to her. "The donuts don't get eaten, you see. It's the *holes* that are important." He'd lifted an old-fashioned with chocolate icing up to his eye and peeked at her through it. "These holes," he croaked, "are the *perfect size*." With that, he'd scooped up the floppy boxes full of stale donuts and crept out the front door, hobbling across the parking lot and down the road, where no

cars passed by, where there was just the wind wafting over the lonely pavement and into the woods beyond.

For eight weeks that went on. Then one December night, when it had been almost two hours since the last customer had come through the door, in came Mr. Pruzelius once again. "I'll take what's left of the donuts, please!" he said as usual. But there were only two left that night on the racks. Hutchy had flipped his ATV during his fifteen-minute break that afternoon and rolled his ankle and had had to go home, so there weren't as many donuts made as usual.

Steffy said she was sorry. "You can have these two for free," she offered hopefully.

Mr. Pruzelius's eyes went wide and he began to tremble. "But... but that's not enough *holes!*" he whimpered, scanning the racks frantically as if more donuts were just going to materialize out of nowhere. "What will I tell—" but here he trailed off.

His face got redder and redder. Steffy started to back away from the counter. Then Mr. Pruzelius put his hands to his head, turned, and stumbled out the door into the freezing night. A terrible chill blew in. The old man crossed the parking lot and vanished into the darkness, for the first time *sans* donuts.

"Well, *that* was something I didn't need to experience," Steffy whispered when he was gone. She wiped down the counter and leaned on it, trying to calm herself. This job couldn't end soon enough. She was so close to being able to afford a Microsoft Zune. Then it was off to college and the next, most exciting phase of her life.

But she couldn't seem to settle herself after the incident. She became hyperaware of the clock ticking on the wall above her, the clock that had been there since 1971. She listened to the wind outside and watched it ruffle the grass beside lonely Greencob Road. She became more and more nervous.

At three-fifteen, the front door opened once more, and the draft rushed in. Steffy looked up to see a tall man standing there. Very, very tall. He was wrapped in a black raincoat and wore a black hat. His face was pale, so incredibly pale. His corneas were tiny, tiny, and they were bright green.

He stepped up to the counter very slowly. His bony feet were bare, totally bare—against store policy!

When he got close enough to the counter, Steffy's heart almost stopped. There was what looked like mist or smoke curling around the man's shoulders and head. It wasn't rising though, it was just dwelling around him. He smelled musty, like a dead grandfather's suit found in an attic.

"*Where are the holes?*" this awful man whispered. "*Pruzelius had none. Give them to me.*"

Steffy put a hand to her chest to control the sudden hitch in her breathing. "It's like I told him," she said. "Hutchy didn't make enough donuts."

The tall man leaned over the counter. His tiny tiny bright green corneas became nothing more than little dots no bigger than the dots over the I's if you wrote the word *shrieking* on a napkin.

"*I need holes,*" he said. "*Without enough holes, I can't see through... to the other side.*"

That was it. Steffy lost it. She slammed her hand down onto a tray beside her and lifted from it a rock hard, two-day-old Lemon Gertner and hurled it at the terrible man. It struck him right between the eyes and he howled, shocked at her aggression. It was safe to say that no one had ever dared strike him with stale pastry. He put his hands to his face and let out a long, high-pitched snarl that didn't sound human. He spun around and seemed to float toward the door, the mist or smoke swirling even faster around him.

The door opened without him even touching it. Then he was out and into the parking lot. But instead of crossing it, his whole body just melted into the dark night, with little gray tendrils of what had embraced him dissolving in the air.

The front door remained open. Only when she became so cold that her teeth began to chatter did Steffy go to it and pull it shut.

Steffy called her father, waking him up, and had her come pick her up from the shop right then and there. She left Stydenstrauer's Donuts and never went back. She bought her Microsoft Zune, and you know what? She really enjoyed listening to her music on it.

By the time she was thirty, Steffy was executive vice president in charge of research and development at one of the biggest tech companies in Europe. She still does like to eat a good donut from time to time. Who doesn't like a donut?

attraction

My name is Jack Le Drew. Ever since I was a kid the thought of getting a normal job seemed like the strangest, most distasteful thing in the world, so from the time I was sixteen, I went the other way: travelling around the country, hiking, climbing, paying my way through temporary gigs in the outdoors, then teaching all those skills to other people. Finally I began to get around the world any way I could. I fought oil fires; I got on the crew of a disastrous expedition to bring up a sunken ship from the bottom of the Mediterranean; I even tried to join the French Foreign Legion. By the time I was thirty, I felt like a full-time adventurer. Sure, I made ends meet in some pretty mundane ways when I had to, but it always felt like my life was being lived in the times when I was on a quest somewhere, and there have been a lot of those. Always biding my time till the next reckless journey, that was me.

At some point, like a lot of people with my same curiosity about remote places and strange experiences, I came across the story of the Tajikistan air crash. On October 17, 1992, a plane headed for the capital city of Dushanbe had been hijacked by a Pamiri gunman demanding a prisoner release in Gorno-Badakhshan, and the plane quickly went down in the Pamir

mountains. Twenty-nine people on board: two pilots, two crew, twenty-five passengers, fourteen of them relief workers. It took nine days just for the plane to be spotted out there in territory that remote.

The scandal came when no one wanted to attempt a rescue. There were dubious reasons for this. Spotters claimed the plane was basically unreachable. They could see glimpses of what was left of it from the air, but saw no evidence of survivors, with the cost and difficulty of reaching them judged untenable. More importantly, the location of the hijacking brought on very real political problems. A civil war had broken out in Tajikistan the previous May, and the country was descending into chaos. The Leninabadis who were still calling some of the shots cried poverty, and any international aid effort or internal military assistance fell apart in a quagmire of politics. Even though there had been three Americans on board, the U.S. decided to stay out of the fray.

Months passed. The war went on, and because the region was so desolate, the plane remained isolated at about six thousand feet, twenty miles west of Ismoil Somoni, the highest mountain peak in the country. No survivors ever crawled through the wilderness to be recovered. Months became years. Reporters and dark-hearted thrill seekers who may have wanted to get up there couldn't past the border restrictions.

It wasn't until 1997 that the region's politics began to settle. For five years, in a tragic diplomatic failure, Flight 70 had remained in the mountains, an eerie but unseen anomaly on the landscape, everyone on it declared dead. Satellite photos depicted shattered and burned remnants from odd and indistinct angles. The crash area was rocky and steep and half-scraped of trees by harsh winds.

That place never left my mind after I read about it for the first time, and so when I did a deep dive into the political situation in Tajikistan, I realized something I think a lot of other people had missed: that by 1998, it had become safe enough for an individual with the right mountaineering skills to reach the plane, for whatever reason they might want to. But the powers that be were apparently content to let the crash lie forever. Recovery operations hadn't exactly gotten any cheaper in five years.

I'll be completely honest and give you the breakdown of my fascination with the crash site. A third of it was glory. I wanted to be the first person to post photos of the site. A third of it was the novelty. I would be completely alone and doing something no one else had the guts or the willingness to do. The last third of my interest was morbid curiosity.

I was thirty-seven in the summer of 1998, when the relative political ease of getting deep into the Pamirs would for the first time combine with acceptable weather conditions to make reaching that plane truly possible. I was so paranoid someone else would have the idea first that I didn't mention it to anyone until three days before I flew from La Guardia Airport to Tokyo, Tokyo to New Delhi, and New Delhi to Bushanbe. From there, I was able to drive the M41 all the way to Dzhalignan, twenty miles northwest of Ismoil Simoni. Climbers usually start their ascent of Ismoil Simoni from a base camp in Moskvina Glade which can only accessed by helicopter. I didn't need to go that high. I intended to walk thirty-five miles to the plane over the course of five days. The snow would be confined to the higher peaks except maybe when I got up there to six thousand feet, just maybe. I consciously did not prepare for a freak snowstorm, which, if it happened, might just kill me. I would also have problems if a private

pilot I'd hired to drop supplies for me in the lowlands for the return hike screwed up or got detained.

All my advance research had made me mostly confident in Flight 70's exact location. If I didn't find it within twenty-four hours of getting to its elevation, though, I'd have to bag it. I couldn't explore any longer than I absolutely needed to. Every eight hours the elements might bring something completely new. Nighttime temperatures in July in that area could dip below freezing.

After two days of rest to deal with my jet lag, I began my hike. I hiked and snapped photographs and the weather held. On the third day I saw Ismoil Somoni in the far distance, snow-capped, bleak and beautiful. But God, was I glad not to have to get that far. When the sun disappeared and the sky went the color of ash, it looked like a silent god promising nothing but death.

My isolation was of a kind I'd never really experienced, and on the fourth night, huddled in my tent in the trees that dotted the rocky lowlands, it seemed to engulf me all at once. I was kicking dirt over the fire I'd built outside my tent; it was about two in the morning. I'd been living in that silence for three days and nights but now truly disturbing images suddenly came unbidden into my mind. They'd breached my mental defenses before, ever since I read about Flight 70, but out there, just miles from the crash site after flying across the world, they were infinitely more vivid and plentiful.

I thought about the silence of more than two thousand nights there inside that broken fuselage as the bodies decomposed. There would have been visitors to it of an inhuman kind—scavengers. Dragging the bodies out one by one, maybe, over the course of weeks, months, in the silence. And after there was nothing left to take, and only bones remaining, that tomb would begin to age meaninglessly, rusting, rotting. If I were to just sit inside there, in an intact seat maybe, what could be heard, I wondered. Just wind, rain, snow. The slow drip of moisture. Insects would have crawled over the wreckage on summer nights, devouring what the mammals didn't want.

My reverie was broken by the sound of something moving in the woods. It stood out only because it didn't have the random scurrying or galloping aspect I was used to. It sounded like a cautious shift, a conscious resettling in a slightly different place, and I think I lost a half hour's sleep playing it back in my mind again and again.

I spent at least two hours a day resting and calculating, going very carefully over my maps, and I figured I'd begin my ascent to the plane from my last camp around midday on July 9th. But the terrain was a wildcard, and I had to detour around a wide stream that had unpredictably overflowed, creating an impassable cutoff I had to spend hours negotiating. And so at about dusk I was faced with the choice of making the final ascent in the dark or waiting until dawn. I won't lie; I was too excited to wait. I had a powerful headlamp so the darkness wasn't going to deter me. Neither would the cold, as the temperature hovered right around thirty-eight degrees, which would drop to about the freezing point higher up.

A mountaineer of my acquaintance who had hiked through the Pamirs in the early eighties had given me his maps, and they had proved terrifically accurate. Getting to about six thousand feet wasn't so much about physical endurance and acclimating; altitude sickness doesn't affect me so much till I get up over eight thousand. The problem here was maneuvering up the rocks in the dark without slipping. I didn't need any hooks or ropes, just good climbing boots. But I did

have to constantly move with my hands pressed against the rocks to maintain my balance. I am a lot of things, but I am not a true mountain climber, so there were a couple of points where when I looked back and down, I got nervous.

There finally came that exciting but frustrating point where I was where I thought I needed to be, and it was just a matter of covering ground in different directions to see if I could spot something. It was about one in the morning, a starry sky overhead. The wind was a little worse than I thought and I was very cold. I saw no wildlife of note, but I was equipped to deal with anything hostile if I had to.

At half past two, when I had started to become truly frustrated and perpetually out of breath, I looked up a slope on the east side of the mountain and saw some small structure jutting out over the top of a ridge high above me. I made my way carefully up to a place where the rocks leveled off somewhat. And that's when I saw what could only have been the tail of the plane up ahead, lying on its side. The shape was unmistakable even in the dark.

The slope wasn't much more than thirty degrees, so if I was careful I could walk without having to hunch over and brace myself on anything. There were still a few trees scattered around and sometimes I grabbed one to hoist myself forward, or just stop and rest and catch my breath.

I arrived at the crash site, a stretch of ground representing a long groove in the valley. Perhaps the pilot had aimed for it in a desperate attempt to land. I spent an hour circling the plane, which looked to have broken apart in four distinct pieces, with much smaller parts lying here and there. Every time I thought I had a grasp on the radius of the site I was wrong. The nose, containing the cockpit, was missing entirely; I would look for it later, as the satellite images had revealed that part that had skidded a good bit further than the rest. Much of the exterior was charred almost black. I could read only the last three letters of the name of the airline printed on the side of the fuselage. One wing, almost entirely intact, had slid down the rocks and gotten snarled in the trees. The other seemed to have crumpled upon impact and partially disintegrated.

The assumption had been that in the savage cold and snow, any passengers who might have survived would have remained inside for protection. I could see why, though, from the grainy photographs that were taken from high above in October of 1992, that it had been assumed no one could have made it out of the fiery wreckage alive.

I took pictures, about fifty, just of the plane's exterior, moving slowly around to get every angle. It wasn't until I got to the opposite side of the plane, looking at it from the north, that my impression of what had happened here suddenly changed.

A hole about two feet wide and about four feet high had been punched into the side of the longest piece of intact fuselage, probably when the plane came into contact with some jutting rocks and the wing was torn away. But there was something covering the hole.

It was a blanket, a blue blanket. It had been affixed to the plane just above the hole with electrical tape that was still somehow doing its job. This made it immediately apparent to me that not only had someone survived, but that they survived long enough to fashion some protection from the elements there inside that tomb.

I almost missed the writing above the blanket because I hadn't been tilting my headlamp over wide enough an area. Someone had written something very faintly on the white metal, in letters about eight inches high, over this crude, accidental entrance into the plane. I had to get very close to read it, it was so faint. It seemed to be either lipstick or red crayon. The letters had been overlaid with a sheen of clear packing tape, as if the writer had known that without it, the elements would wash away the writing quickly. The words there read:

HALLOWEEN HAUNTED HOUSE ADMISSION \$3

I backed away, resting again. Really I was just staving off the inevitable. I thought I had mentally steeled myself for entry into the plane and whatever I might see there, but this visual—those words—kept me out. How long might they have lived, I thought, to transition from a mode of pure survival into a mindset that spawned some kind of gallows humor.

I sat for a moment on the rocks, less than ten feet from the hole. My conscience tried to shut me down but I wouldn't let it. I had come too far and spent too much. Before I tell this next part, I do want whoever's listening to this just to hear a bit of audio I took out there, beside the plane, because I just don't think you can understand how alone I felt unless you have some kind of actual taste of that place.

(audio: wind, heavy breathing)

I pushed the blue blanket aside and maneuvered carefully through the crack into the fuselage, trying not to rip my jacket, pants or flesh on jagged protruding metal shards. Enough air had gotten into this section on a consistent basis so that it wasn't as stuffy as I thought it might be; there were tiny cracks in the metal frame in several places. There was no particular odor in there, except of simple mustiness.

Immediately the headlamp showed me something dangling right in front of my face right at eye level. It was an index card, about three by five inches, hung from the ceiling of the craft by a piece of what I thought was dental floss. Something was written on it. I rubbed the letters and came to the conclusion they were done in permanent black marker, fading year by year. They said, in all capital letters:

WARNING! IN THIS HAUNTED HOUSE YOU MAY SEE TERRIFYING THINGS! I WARNED YOU!
LEAVE YOUR ADMISSION FEE IN THE BOX AND START AT THE BACK. HAPPY HALLOWEEN!

SIGNED, LAWRENCE BRAID.

With a crude drawing of a Jack o' Lantern beside the signature. Lawrence Braid, I knew, had been one of the three Americans on board the plane, an engineer for the Red Cross.

I took in the entire space. The floor was tilted, as this part of the plane had settled at an angle, but it was not quite dramatic enough to make movement difficult. About twelve rows of seats. About a third of them had been smashed into nothingness. The survivor or survivors of Flight 70 likely dragged the fatalities out and hopefully buried them. But there was one body remaining in one of the intact window seats. I will not much describe the condition of the body here except to say it had been almost six years. The body was slumped down, leaning against

the window. I couldn't even tell if it was male or female. The victim was wearing a heavy winter coat. Its lower jaw was gone.

The other signs Lawrence Braid had left behind here were positioned in strategic places inside the cramped section of the fuselage. The first one was taped to the bathroom door against the rear wall, in the galley where the flight attendants would have sat. I moved down the aisle carefully, stepping over a suitcase and a backpack and a stack of blankets.

THIS IS THE BATHROOM WHERE I HID, Braid had written on the card. IT PROBABLY SAVED MY LIFE. I HEARD THE BEGINNINGS OF THE COMMOTION FROM INSIDE IT AND COWERED HERE. AFTER THAT I DON'T REMEMBER ANYTHING UNTIL I WOKE UP WITH SOMEONE ELSE'S BLOOD IN MY EYES AND SNOW FALLING ON MY FACE. NOW, LOOK TO YOUR RIGHT FOR A SURPRISE IN SEAT 38L!

The door to the bathroom had a deep crack running from top to bottom and was too difficult to open without forcing it loudly, and I felt that to make noise would frighten me more than I already was. So I left it alone, turned around, and moved over to row 38.

This body was laid out across three seats, two of the armrests having been broken off at some point. This one was entirely a charred skeleton. Whatever fire had claimed it had thinned away much of its bones, especially around the ribcage. Someone had encased that ribcage in a mud-crusted pilot's jacket and propped a pilot's hat on its skull. Its right hand had been arranged so that it seemed to be gripping something. It was a spiral-bound textbook of some kind, burned half away by fire. I could read some of the lettering on the cover but not enough to identify the book. The index card taped to the skeleton's hat filled in the details.

MEET YOUR FLIGHT CAPTAIN, the writing said. BOO! IT'S NOT EASY TO LAND A PLANE WITH A CRAZY HIJACKER ON BOARD IN LOUSY WEATHER OVER A MOUNTAIN RANGE WITH WIND GUSTS CAUSING TURBULENCE SO BAD THAT PEOPLE WERE BOUNCING AND SHOUTING. I SALUTE YOU, CAPTAIN TATOSOV! HOPE THIS FLIGHT MANUAL I FOUND IN THE COCKPIT DETAILING PROCEDURES FOR EMERGENCY SITUATIONS WILL COME IN HANDY IN THE NEXT WORLD!

The cockpit, yes. Braid had brought this back from the plane's nose then, a place I had yet to explore.

I moved on through this haunted house, wondering at what point Braid had gone completely insane, if he'd been the only one left alive when he began his Halloween project, or if he'd had help.

The third exhibit I discovered was nothing more than a letter Braid had found in someone's luggage, someone he did not know. It had survived the crash almost entirely intact. He'd sealed it up inside a plastic bag and now invited me, the haunted house's only guest, to remove it from the cheap netting on the back of the aisle seat in row 34R and read it.

I had to translate it much later from the photographs I took of it. The letter was essentially a confession by one of the passengers on board to his mistress in Taskent detailing how he had murdered his wife the week before and burned their house down to cover the tracks. Just six days later, it turned out, this man too would be surrounded by fire. *I'll be with you soon, darling*, he concluded his letter. *We're free.*

IS THERE *ANYONE* ON THIS PLANE WHO WASN'T TRYING TO KILL PEOPLE? Lawrence Braid's note jested.

The end of the note directed me toward the front of this section of the plane, where the gaping hole created when it had separated from the front quarter had been blocked off by anything and everything that could be collected or fashioned by human hands: suitcases, pillows, beverage carts, window curtains, and especially seats uprooted from the floor. The wall was ramshackle but effective. Thin wisps of air wound through its flaws and ruffled my hair ever so slightly.

Propped against the mounds of debris that had become a wall was another skeleton. An orange sweater hung loosely around its ribcage. Its head was missing. But no, there it was, placed neatly between the skeleton's crossed legs. The headlamp beam created dancing shadows in its eye sockets. I spotted another index card taped near this display, fastened to a suitcase. Beside the card was a Polaroid, a slightly out of focus and messily framed shot of a young man with long black hair looking out of frame. It was obviously taken when the plane was still aloft.

AND HERE IS YOUR HIJACKER, the index card read. HE CERTAINLY WISHES HE HAD DIED IN THE CRASH, BECAUSE WHEN WE FOUR SURVIVORS STARTED TO LOSE OUR MINDS, WE GOT PRETTY MAD. THERE WAS A LITTLE TORTURE, I'M AFRAID. THE MAN FROM SOUTHAMPTON LIKED TO HEAR HIM SCREAM. THE HEAD WAS REMOVED POST-MORTEM, THOUGH. OR WAS IT? MY MEMORY IS FUZZY.

IF YOU WISH TO SEE THE ANNEX, AND THE LAST EXHIBIT ON OUR TOUR, PLEASE LEAVE AN ADDITIONAL DOLLAR IN THE BOX. IT'S WORTH IT!

I did not leave a dollar inside the box, which was an empty tin of mints with an open lid.

The air outside the fuselage felt startlingly fresh after my twenty minutes inside the tomb. I breathed in and out, looking up at the stars. I scrolled through the photos on my camera to make sure I'd gotten everything. These represented the tainted fortune I was bound to make when I got back home.

The other parts of the plane couldn't realistically be entered; they were burned too badly. I walked toward a relatively flat section of the rocky gorge where there were a few more trees. The nose of the plane couldn't be very far away, less than two hundred yards. And it was indeed where I thought it would be. The problem would be getting to it. It had settled in the trees about fifty yards down a slope so steep that it wasn't clear to me how Lawrence Braid or anyone else could have reached it safely with snow and ice in these mountains. If I'd learned anything in my years doing foolishly adventurous things, though, it's that where there is a will, there is a way. And to someone driven half-insane by fear, hunger, and despair, as Braid had likely been, the forty-five-degree slope I was looking at would have merely presented the possibility of a sudden and merciful death.

I secured my camera in my backpack and then put it back on myself on the wrong side of my torso, so that it pressed very awkwardly against my chest. I sat down on the rocks, braced my hands behind me, and began to scoot down, leaning way back to even out my weight. I skidded a little almost immediately, and forced myself to stop and think about each short section of rock

that would take me down. I then progressed somewhat blindly, as lifting my head and curving my neck to see exactly where I was going was too great a constant strain on my muscles.

It was slow going, feeling my way down, scraping my back against the rock while the weight of my pack felt like it was pinning my overworked lungs. But I got there. I finally felt the tips of my boots press against the side of the aircraft's nose. It was angled perpendicular to me, so the elements would have spared the contents of the cockpit for a while, at least somewhat. I was able to maneuver slowly around to the open side. Just ten feet off away from that great wound in the plane's structure, a thin but possibly deadly dark crevasse beckoned to me from a split in the terrain. Whether it was three feet or thirty feet deep, I couldn't tell.

There was not much to the space before me. Room enough for the flight crew, that was about it. The structure had been punctured on the left side and one of the pilots' seats was totally mangled. The windshield was shattered but mostly intact. No bodies.

A final index card had been taped to the floor here, in front of the throttle levers, and it was flanked by two photographs on one side, two on the other. Polaroids again. I had to look at them for a very long time to understand them.

I WAS HERE, the card read. IT WAS THE THIRD NIGHT AFTER EVERYONE ELSE WAS DEAD. I BROKE TWO TOES SLIDING ON THE ICE TOWARD THE NOSE. I LOOKED UP AND SAW THE LIGHT COMING OVER THE WEST RIDGE. IT WAS GREEN. THEN THE WHOLE SKY WENT THAT COLOR ALL AT ONCE, AND IT BEGAN TO RIPPLE. IT WAS BEAUTIFUL AND TERRIFYING. THERE WERE VOICES THAT WEREN'T HUMAN.

BUT THEY DIDN'T TAKE ME.

- L.B.

The Polaroids illustrated the note in a fashion so crude that you could almost argue that these were merely defective prints. Two were nothing more than an indistinct sea of a strangely textured green color, while the third showed the same thing but at least had two trees in the foreground for context, so that I did believe I was looking at a corrupted night sky. The edge of the fourth photo seemed to have captured part of a vast dark object thinly concealed within the layer of rippling green atmosphere that had replaced the sky, but what the object was would have been complete conjecture, as it offered no detail beyond a blockiness of shape.

Like the other pictures and documents on Lawrence Braid's tour, I photographed these multiple times, then left them exactly where they were. I exited the nose of the aircraft and sat securely on its torn open edge, tucking the camera back into my pack for the ascent back up the slope. I wondered when Braid had died, and exactly how. It would have required precious physical and mental energy to create his haunted house.

From about one hundred and twenty yards beyond the crest of the slope, there was the sound of something heavy banging twice against the fuselage of the airplane. The tinniness of the sound clanged and cracked against the rocks.

Even in my exhausted state, my mind was processing everything quickly enough to flash immediately back to the night before, sitting at my camp after extinguishing the fire, and

hearing something shift in the woods, a sound less than two seconds in duration but which somehow suggested intent.

I got moving. There were two indentations in the rock slope well placed so as to allow my legs a good first upward push. As cold as it was, the rock was bone dry and I had only one scary moment, when my right foot gave and the rest of my body slipped downward two feet, my chin bumping the rock painfully. I waited till my heartbeat slowed and continued my climb.

Soon enough I was on my feet again, standing and staring at the wreckage in the distance. I stood in the dark and waited. I would need to put my warmer, less malleable gloves on soon. My fingers were starting to become painfully cold and stiff.

I moved toward the plane, wondering if I would have the courage, if the source of the sound did not reveal itself, to go back inside it. *Do it again*, I said to the phantom noise maker as I circled the area, maybe out loud, I don't know. *Do it again*.

I called out, very loudly, to anyone who might be around, in the shadows. No response.

When I was within five feet of the wrecked opening of the craft from which I had originally emerged, the glow of my headlamp sputtered momentarily as the batteries fought the cold, and then it lit up a pair of legs dangling from above the opening, legs leading up to a living torso belonging to a stranger sitting atop the plane.

In an instant that shocking visual was gone, and I realized it wasn't legs I was looking at. It was only two deep scrapes in the fuselage, forming an inverted V which I had actually been aware of before. My imagination had only succumbed now to this hideous illusion, when dark had suddenly erupted in light. That was what decided me against entering the plane again. With my mental state the way it was, I was now afraid I might start screaming and never stop.

The sound I had heard, I rationalized out of a combination of exhaustion, cold, the muddying effects of altitude, and simple cowardice, must not have been what I thought it was. I had likely disturbed something inside the plane which caused a later unbalancing of metal components, a subsidence. To the teetering Jack Le Drew of that moment, it made perfect sense.

I took no more photographs. Instead I began to move back to the route that had brought me to the crash site. I turned around exactly once, to take in, one final time, the grim sight of Flight 70, struck by the bizarre majesty of it, this massive, proud machine and wonder of technology that had been slain by one person, reduced first to a bloody, fire-chewed parody of itself but slowly transformed into a solemn monument.

Five minutes later, moving far less carefully than I should have, I was already a hundred yards down the curving route through the rocks when someone struck the fuselage with a heavy object once again, two times, a sound almost lost in the wind around me.

I remember turning and rooting myself in place as if bracing for the sight I suspected might be soon to come. I became part of the landscape, a fixed feature like the distressed trees that struggled in it.

I was on relatively level ground. Whatever might approach me would have only one path to do it, and they would have to emerge directly into my headlamp beam, warning me of their presence from twenty yards away.

And so, he came. Not some hunched, huddled form in rags, beaten down by years of deprivation. He walked slowly into the beam with silent, stoic composure. He wore a dark green sweater and tan pants under a thick and oversized denim jacket, a knit cap on his head. He was bearded, very tall. He looked at me with only mild curiosity, as if he had been expecting me since 1992.

He came to within just a few yards of me. Then he extended a shaky right hand, in which he gripped a small empty mints tin, its lid open.

You didn't pay, Lawrence Braid said to me.

Of the salvage operation that was finally mounted just days after I stumbled out of the mountains and went to the authorities with what I knew, I have nothing to add that can't be found through publicly available sources. It's just details, the sad administrative part of a lurid story. What matters is this: that they never found the only long-term survivor of the crash, who disappeared into the Pamirs without speaking one word to me beyond the three he had offered there within walking distance of the wreckage. He had turned away and walked serenely into the darkness, and he did not follow me out of the wilderness. I moved alone back towards Dzhalgan.

Each night after crushing my campfire I waited, waited for the sound of movement in the woods around my succession of temporary shelters. Each night I lay down frightened to fall asleep because the nightmares that gripped got me worse and worse. In every one of them I went down with Route 70, crushed upon impact.

If you're wondering: Yes, I went ahead and sold my photographs of the Halloween haunted house attraction to the highest bidder. Today, the route I took to the crash site is wildly over-traveled by hikers and climbers, because Lawrence Braid, once known only as a dedicated relief worker lending aid to others in a crisis, has metamorphosed into a wilderness legend of whom the curious and the greedy seek any physical sign. At night, they wait in the cold and the snow, and the heat and the rain, for that green light to ripple in the sky and hearken the return of... well, whatever it was that Braid believed he saw as he cowered in the broken cockpit of the aircraft.

All the alleged sightings of Braid since 1998 are unreliable and unconfirmed, as even mine was. Sometimes I think the only way he could never have been found out there by now is that he did indeed perish, the last one to die, shortly after completing work on his attraction, probably.

I should have taken that little mints box out of his extended hand, for proof, just to confirm to myself as I get old that I *had* seen him standing there in front of me. That's what I should have done.

occupiers

17 September, 1812.

How confusing it must have been, Uncle, for the Imperial Guard to finally enter this grand city and be greeted by no one. No delegation of supplicants, no formal presentation of surrender. It's now been realized that the Russians' plan was to evacuate every citizen who could walk or crawl, and the place was inhabited upon our arrival only by the wounded, the weak, the derelict, the orphaned.

As the very first night fell, fires broke out everywhere. Remnants of Kutusov's army are attempting to leave Bonaparte with nothing to claim as victor. Immediately four hundred men, including some from the 13th Infantry, were organized into a primitive fire brigade, but by midnight the sky was orange and crimson with the flames. There was no direction one could look without seeing densely arranged buildings wilting under the inferno. Bonaparte himself was forced to move his headquarters from the Kremlin to a ruined palace on the St. Petersburg Road. De Beauharnais led the 13th and 14th beyond the city limits as well, and we watched the burning from afar for two whole days. The rains did finally come and applied the salve we could not, but when it was judged safe enough for us to re-enter the city, it became quickly clear that everything ever built inside it would continue to burn.

The looting began immediately. Soldiers and scurrying partisans alike dismantle this proud place recklessly and with much violence. The men have been forced to billet wherever they can, making command more difficult. Contandin's orders to us contradict themselves, and he seems utterly flummoxed. No one seems to know what comes next. The men of the 92nd and 106th line have been allowed to spread out in the northwest sector. Most believe Bonaparte will not leave this city without demanding terms from Alexander, which means we must hunker down and wait for that message of capitulation to come. The Russian retreat was so hasty that substantial caches of grain, vegetables, and potable water were left behind, but how long they will last, we cannot be sure.

21 September.

The billet Contandin selected for the 92nd is an Orthodox church at the end of a muddy lane. I awoke last night to a terrible sound. Meffre, the young private with unkempt red hair, was also awake, but he has not seemed to shut his eyes once since battle shock struck him in the trench at Borodino. The sight of an iron ball shrieking towards him from an artillery battery, missing his face by inches, was apparently more than his fevered mind could stand. Since then he has been more liability than asset. He was sitting upright on a pew and staring out one of the broken stained glass windows.

The sound was like the roar of some great raging animal in the last throes of life. One could envision it growling with daunting anger, then tilting its head back to release a more guttural

cry that echoed through the cobblestones and the stone ruins. Again and again it came, from somewhere beyond the lane. Meffre seemed to be in a state of mesmerism. The light-hearted fool Claudon woke as well. The cries faded away, leaving only the low rumble of the flames that slowly consume some sort of factory several blocks to the west.

'Do you know that sound?' I asked Meffre, and after some rumination he replied, 'It is a horse.' 'Well, then,' I suggested, 'perhaps one of us should go out there and end its considerable misery.' 'It is not dying,' came the affrighted reply. 'It has gone mad.'

Of course. Why should it be otherwise. The lack of food and care, the noxious fires blotting out the sky, the sounds of battle spanning weeks, and finally, utter abandonment. Why should every beast in this unfortunate country not have gone utterly insane. I tried to fall back asleep, but each night now brings perhaps two hours of real rest. In the morning we continued our searches building to building for food and supplies. Some of the men provide aid to the more desperate Russian families when they can, but there is so little to share. Others simply mock them and have lost all pity. The fires around the city have created a persistent cloud of soot which hangs in the air and impairs one's field of vision. Contandin may join some of us up with the Polish sappers in their attempts to arrest the Russian arsonists. They maneuver in the shadows all around the city, hiding in attics, storefronts, inside tombs. More than one hundred have already been captured and shot.

24 September.

The gnawing ache in my stomach is only in part borne of hunger. I have heard a chilling rumor. I must remind myself that sources within the regiment are not always to be trusted. But it is Varsenau's understanding that we are to remain in Moscow for as long as it takes to receive word from Alexander of his surrender. But it is becoming late September and the weather even now is turning. It takes only venturing beyond the canal, as I have done on maneuvers, to feel the snap in the air which means that the snows are coming. Broussard believes that from the moment we passed through the city gates, we had but one week to reverse course and commence a return to Smolensk ahead of winter. Surely Bonaparte must understand this. No one else seems to feel the fear that I do, the certainty that a terrible mistake is being made. I look for it in their eyes but the men seem so detached. Perhaps the accumulation of battle fatigue has dampened what they feel.

Before evening fell came word that Corporal Vitrelle's life had been ended by a sniper's bullet. I and Varsenau and Meffre were sent to retrieve him. He lay face down on the steps of a library. There had been almost no blood. The silent buildings around us told us nothing of his vanished assassin. Varsenau stayed behind on guard while Meffre and I employed a mule to carry Vitrelle as we searched for a dignified place for burial. We cannot wait for the carts to move the dead into the fields beyond the canal. The fires have made the area so warm that decomposition will set in too quickly.

The space chosen for burial, on a settlement beside the Khimka River, was once a wheelwright's shop. It is dark and small, but clean, a perfect square. The floor is only bare earth and with some effort, a grave was dug. One day when the space is reclaimed, it is probable that no one will ever know a French soldier rests here.

27 September.

The days consist of transporting every conceivable scrap of supply for either an eventual march or a long hibernation within the city. We relentlessly interrogate locals about what they might be concealing, and there are ever more fruitless efforts to contain the fires. At half past eight last night, just as I was given some rice and lentils for the evening meal, I heard a commotion from the street outside the church and followed some men from the 7th Foot Battery to a spot two blocks over.

There had been a gruesome discovery. A group was surrounding a dead Westphalian who was still upright. He was a lance corporal, terribly bent backward at the waist over the windowsill of an abandoned tenement, his upper half having been smashed through a wide pane of glass while his feet remained firmly on the stones beneath him. No one seemed to want to touch him, but finally his upper half was pulled out of the shadows.

His right cheek had been torn open. There were several shallow gouges and bites on his chest. But his death seemed to have come as a result of great impact from something unknown. The wooden planks had been demolished in many places all around him, driving his broken legs deeper into the foundation. His waist was misshapen and compressed in grisly fashion. The glass from the shattered window had fallen entirely into the tenement. It was as if he had been struck by a runaway cart that had withdrawn and vanished.

I saw a young boy watching us with a strange grin on his dirty face. Contandin told him to come forward, and he bounded over as if expecting us to engage in play. Contandin barked at him in his erratic Russian, asking if he had seen what happened here. The boy lowered himself immediately to his hands and knees on the cobblestones and kicked his little legs out again and again in imitation of something far bigger than he was, moving his head up and down, then shaking it extravagantly. He made not a sound; perhaps he was a mute, perhaps feeble. Contandin shooed him away and the boy ran with a curious joviality down the block.

Two men from the 7th dragged the corporal away. There was an odd smell in the window, dank and foul. I returned to the church. Each day the men commit some new and petty act of vandalism against it, defacing icons, toppling statues.

Again I awoke in the night, but not for any reason I understood. All around me the remnants of the 92nd line slept uneasily, stretched out on pews, or even across the altar. I saw Meffre sitting in a corner of the church, gazing once again at the muddy red sky beyond the windows. His left hand was clasped around a chunk of roundshot he stole from a reserve artillery unit. He has taken to carrying this talisman with him wherever he goes, even to meals and the latrine.

30 September.

I know that there have been desertions since we arrived because the men speak of them, but I cannot tell where the deserters have gone, and what exactly drove them. My first and most

commanding thought is that they, like me, are watching the sky and know more about the weather in the region than I, and realize the danger we are in by staying.

This afternoon I saw Murel cataloguing a cache of short sabres uncovered at the university. Murel is my only connection to reliable information, as he speaks often with Contandin. And so I asked him outright what he has heard. Bonaparte, he told me, has received no reply to his messages to Alexander. Not a word. And so we continue to wait. We cannot move on to St. Petersburg, as Kutuzov still has troops waiting for us in that direction, and the path is epidemic with partisans. To the southeast, the Russian forces are said to be regrouping. We will stay until Alexander gives in. *But what if he doesn't?* I asked. What if he's merely toying with the Emperor, knowing he's brought the entire army into a fatal dead end? Why should Alexander acquiesce when he knows we'll starve here? Murel regarded me cruelly, losing patience. The Emperor, he said, has studied in great detail the geography around us, so all we can do is trust in him.

But I do *not* trust him. God help me, I do not trust Bonaparte, who is not the man he once was at the height of his power. I trust mathematics. Each day grows shorter and the temperatures fall. Behind us, from Smolensk to the Neman River, the Russians have utterly stripped the land and there will be nothing for us or the pack animals to eat for weeks returning to Prussia or even pushing into the Ukraine. As for shelter, I can think of few structures I saw on the march after Borodino that had not already been razed to thwart us. In the mud of late summer, the supply trains became stuck; in the snow and ice, they will become buried. The horses will first stop pulling our burdens, and then perish.

Murel ordered me away from him. I will not approach him again. Sunset was at quarter past six. It has been almost thirteen days since we claimed Moscow. Yesterday was my twenty-second birthday.

2 October.

After nine hours of fruitless maneuvers and tedious sentry duty on a perimeter strung across the city's north edge, the 92nd marched back to its heart in the early evening. The column broke down and we all began our nightly ritual of going to wherever the next meal was, in this case a cup of fish stew, bread and weak tea. As I took my portion to the steps of the music conservatory where a dozen other men ate and dozed, we all heard shouting.

Contandin was running towards us down the street, cursing, spouting angry tears, supporting his left hand with the right. Blood coursed over his wrist. He had been bitten, unprovoked, by a horse which had come out of nowhere and charged him. The wound was quite terrible. Two medics emerged immediately to tend to him. He exhorted the nearest soldiers to kill the beast and pointed uncertainly to the south, then sank to his knees and lay supine on the cold stones beneath him.

A stupor has clouded the men and only four of us committed to action while all the others on the street chewed their bread and stared listlessly. Myself, Varsenaux, a private named Guoleme, and finally, at Contandin's order, Meffre, once the sharpest shot among us. I knew that was a mistake. We others took our rifles as well. Immediately we heard a shout coming from behind a row of abandoned tenements that had slowly burned out. We hurried in that direction.

This sector was grim and still choked by sporadic flames. Where one fire had died, another had taken its place. It was likely that Contandin had been haunting places and situations he should not have. We found ourselves on a street of prostitutes and addicts. People stood idly on corners, huddled against buildings, having given up hope even before the city was abandoned. Several destitute families emerged from their hovels to watch the commotion as we passed.

Then I saw it. A gray horse, galloping on the main avenue that leads to an old hospital. It was an imposing beast, and its hooves could be heard smacking the stones from fifty metres away. It ran from our left to our right and disappeared behind a block of public baths. We all twisted our faces and bodies slowly to follow its progress. It appeared once again, turning down Petrovska Street. The tall flames yearning up from a ruined theater lit it uncannily as it galloped without rider or harness. The throng on the street watched it silently, transfixed by this aberration.

Sure enough, after disappearing a clock tower, leaving us with only the ghost of its footfalls, it emerged again to make yet another right-hand turn, now behind us. Down Strastnov it cantered at great speed, passing close enough to the somber buildings to cause an old man and woman to press themselves back into a doorway. It seemed only a matter of moments before the holes and cracks in the decrepit road caused the great horse to stumble, but it possessed a singular knack for avoiding any impedance. All shouting had stopped and there were only wordless spectators, myself included.

Varsenaux pointed and I saw that the horse's left flank was afflicted with a jutting arrow, a full twenty centimeters of wood emerging from a wound of the recent past. Someone yelled at Meffre to shoot the creature down. He took to steadying his rifle but we saw with utter shock that he did not relinquish his hold on the chunk of roundshot he has been gripping tightly for these many days, and he was attempting to steady his aim while wrestling with this extraordinary handicap. I shouted at him to drop the roundshot but he was focused entirely on his task.

He discharged one blast at the animal, which had turned a final corner and begun to conclude the square it had drawn all around us, splashing through elongated puddles of mud and oil. The shot missed, harmlessly ripping away a chunk of brickwork. Meffre tried again, shooting virtually one-handed. The second bullet vanished into the air, punctuating his rare failure.

I strode up to him and tore the rifle from his hands in disgust. The horse streaked off to the north, putting more distance between itself and our woeful contingent, darting into a dark alleyway barely wider than its body. It then vanished. Quickly its footfalls were no more.

Meffre's face was slack as I and Varsenaux cursed him. If reports of his brain fever catch the attention of Contandin, I fear he will be doomed to court-martial. His eyes were watery, bloodshot. He sat down heavily on the street, mentally adrift, dangerously emaciated, barely a soldier anymore.

'You cannot kill that horse,' I heard a voice say behind me in labored French, and I turned to see a Russian girl of perhaps eighteen standing beside what must have been her mother and much younger brother. She was filthy and disheveled but her long blonde hair had suffered no ill effect from her hunger. She wore a crudely fashioned medal of the Virgin Mary around her neck. There was a bright and vivid hatred in her eyes. 'You have created a demon,' she said, 'You are to blame.'

I felt myself withering under her stare and am ashamed now that I felt the need to defend myself to this urchin. 'It is war, miss, that has done this,' I said to her crossly, 'and you'll be wise to keep silent before you insult my country.'

She shook her head, unmoved by my argument. 'It will come again,' she warned, 'for all of you, and I pray it takes more lives than you can imagine.' At first I thought she spoke of war. Of war. Do you see how this might have been, Uncle? But upon thinking more on her words, I believe she did allude to the crazed horse that had drawn a strangely threatening square around us before making away.

We could not stay and entertain this girl's curses. We withdrew.

I saw Meffre walking away down the avenue alone. *Why does he cling to that roundshot?* I asked Guoleme later as we shared a flask before first light. *It is because,* Guoleme explained to me, *he believes as long as it is not inside a cannon, it cannot be shot into his head.*

4 October.

Light snow fell on the city today. A regimental inspection had been commanded at dawn, the third since we arrived in Moscow. The men all across the city collected themselves for presentation to the officers. In the old church, we were aware immediately that many men were missing. No one acted to locate them. Among the absent was Private Meffre, who has not been seen since the night of his failure to bring down the furious gray horse. Another deserter. Some, I've been told, have headed southeast to willingly surrender to Kutusov in the event of a counterattack.

Murel was to bear the brunt of the responsibility for the depletion. But Contandin was not present to inspect the men. Word went around that the bite he suffered had brought him a severe infection.

I worked for hours preparing food in the hospital ward set up on Boulevard Petrovskiy, where three hundred men are interned. I was exhausted by the time I returned to the church and ate something, intent only the brief balm of tobacco on collapsing on a pew.

It was around eleven that I was shaken awake by Murel, who quietly ordered myself and another private to follow him outside. He instructed us to leave our rifles behind. We left the sleeping men, and once on the street, Murel asked in a careful voice what knowledge I had of a secure burying place where Vitrelle had been laid to rest. I told him of the wheelwright's shop near the Khimka and he bade us walk with him. As we followed, he demanded that we were to tell no one of what we saw when we reached our destination.

At length we entered a building that marked it as a home for the insane. In an airy room down an arched passageway, a doctor sat beside a bed on which lay Contandin, stripped to the waist. He was dead. His right arm was colored in red and black from hand to shoulder and had swollen to twice its normal size. His eyes were open and his head was tilted towards us as if he were expecting us to arrive. His heart had given out quite suddenly, Murel told us. He ordered the boy-faced private and myself to take the body away and bury it respectfully in the

wheelwright's shop. We were to pile him into a cart and take him through back streets so as not to attract undue attention.

The doctor helped us cover the body with sheets and we went out into the night again, pulling the cart through an inch of snow. The private, Oiseau by name, looked morose and fearful of snipers, though these have now been expunged. The streets were at their loneliest. No one watched our progress.

We brought Contandin into the shop where Vitrelle had been laid to rest. The earth had since grown cold and it made digging much harder. It was well past one o'clock when we finally placed our charge into his shallow grave by the light of the lantern. First, Oiseau reminded me to remove the sheets that held our superior. They would have use for the regiment with the onset of the cold weather. Doing so exposed his anguished face, if ever so briefly. One of his eyes bulged eccentrically. Before we completed the process of interring the body, Oiseau asked for a short respite. He offered me a measure of brandy, which I accepted gratefully. I had barely taken it from him when there came from behind us a loud thudding sound, so sudden and violent I dropped the flask from my hand.

The center of the wooden door we had closed against the wind an hour earlier splintered with a long vertical crack as a great weight collided against it. Oiseau's eyes went wide. We did not know if we should approach the door or retreat to the corner of our small enclosure. I shouted at Oiseau to hand me the lantern as I kept close to the window.

The door was struck a second time, and shards of pine flew inward and settled upon the earth. The vertical crack split wide enough to let cold air into the room. A mass protruded into it at eye level, then withdrew. We heard the grunting of an animal. I held the lantern aloft just as the beast's snout disappeared from view. Now with the door breaking apart, we could better discern from outside the sound of hooves maneuvering on stone.

We remained rooted in place, possessing no comprehension of the spectacle before us. For a moment, there was silence. Then Oiseau saw before I did the shadow that emerged at the window, and he recoiled before the thick glass exploded inward. A shard of it sliced across my forehead; we avoided injury from the rest. The upper body of the gray horse crashed through the window, its lower half impeded by the wooden foundation. The horse coughed and sputtered and twisted its head left and right, snapping at me. I staggered backwards. Oiseau had collapsed to his knees, arms over his head protectively.

I swing the lantern and it made contact with the horse's head, breaking. There was a tiny explosion of light which made its feral eyes glimmer, and in the next instant there was only darkness. The horse cried out and pulled back. But then it hoisted itself up so that its front legs clamped the windowsill and it began to push inward, attempting again to climb into the room to get at us.

I yelled at Oiseau to run. He ran out the side door into a fetid hallway leading to the rear exit. I felt in the dark for the shovel with which we had buried Contandin. The horse clambered over the windowsill clumsily, its back hooves scraping it as it began to snort and scream in the way I'd heard it many nights before from the church on Berzarina Street. I smelled decay on its neglected body and its breath as its weight struck the floor hard and it struggled to rise like a ship that had gone aground. Bits of glass likely embedded themselves in its hide. I could see the silhouette of the arrow that had lodged in its left flank.

I frantically swung the head of the shovel at the strong neck that was exposed to me, hitting the horse with the tool's flat side. It released a bizarre wet bark and lunged at me. I sidestepped it, turned, and stumbled the way Oiseau had gone. Upon reaching the door I spun and slammed it behind me, then felt my way down the corridor blindly and pushed on the exit leading into the alley. Oiseau was there. We ran between buildings and down the avenue.

We were not followed. We made our way back to the church without a word, spending some time outside of it settling ourselves completely before entering again. 'I'll get my rifle,' Oiseau said, 'and keep watch, and if it comes, I'll kill the cursed thing.'

I waited with him for another half hour. But there were no disturbances on the street. No shadows lengthened, no hooves were heard to clack on stone. No one woke. It might have all been nothing but a dream save for the blood that had smeared my forehead and trickled down into my eyes.

Images of this place intrude and swarm, cluttering my mind, and I transcribe them only in the hope that if my life ends out on the plain, these pages will be found and someone will at least know my name and connect me to a time and place. Seventeen nights after first entering this city, I walk the streets without aim, counter to my orders. Discipline concerns me not at all anymore.

I have seen men of the regiment start fires for reasons they cannot even express, driven by tedium and anger. Towers burn. The trees of a cemetery were swallowed in flames. I have seen impoverished children playing on an overturned cannon, pretending it is a great black bird on whose back they soar. A soldier stood in a public park where vultures now amass, daring men one by one to strike him as hard as they could, until he finally collapsed, bleeding and laughing. A broken carriage with its doors encrusted with jewels floated on its side down the Moscow River, a naked old man in a long beard riding atop the wreckage. I regarded the abandoned Kremlin from across that same expanse just before dawn, black smoke still curling around its ruins. A pack of wild dogs ran in a column atop the buttress wall. Through the ruined window of the wheelwright's shop, jagged glass still clinging to the frame like icicles, I saw, on the very spot where Contandin had been laid to rest, two feminine shapes huddled together to keep warm. They wore the sheets in which we'd delivered him. I looked away when I sensed their faces turn to me. I wondered if they had completed the burial or dumped the body on the street.

I set my pen down now, Uncle, and tell myself I shall not pick it up again until there is something other in the world to experience than this cradle of madness. *Why are we not on the march, Varsenaux* whispers to me in the dark, *when the snow has already begun to fall? How will we be fed if we stay, or if we go?* I do not answer him. I only imagine his name etched faintly on granite, somewhere near my own, in some field far away from the place we were born.

9 October.

Yesterday, our exodus southwest toward the city of Kaluga finally began. Formations were organized, supply trains were loaded, schedules and street routes were distributed. Bonaparte

has never received terms from Alexander. We approached Moscow as victors but leave it as victims of a cruel and mocking silence. It rained lightly from dawn to dusk.

Just before the first gray light of day colored the windows of the church, I rose among the general commotion and with my rifle in hand took to the street, mixing anonymously among hundreds of my countrymen. Three blocks away, behind a toppled bell tower, I set a path down a quiet street and entered the Cathedral of the Ascension.

There was no one inside the place. Pieces of a shattered statue of the blessed virgin were strewn in the aisle between the pews. At the rear of the church was a square pine door built into the floor. I pulled it open, releasing a veil of dust into the air. I began to descend a set of crumbling stairs. Before I sealed myself into the place I had noted on a map scavenged from the university library by Private Oiseau, I secured my rifle to my back and lit two candles, one for each hand. Only then did I bring the door down upon myself.

There were eight steps in all. I felt a faint funnel of cool air at the level of my neck as I stepped with trepidation into a corridor only an inch taller than I was. I had to bend at the waist so that the point of my rifle would not scrape the ceiling. The candlelight was printed on the stones around me in deep ocher, dampness and age distorting its true color.

The catacombs were very small and the corridor ended just ten metres or so ahead. Coffins of lead and clay were stacked three high against each wall, separated by warped and misshapen wooden shelves. Inside stone chests were the bones of families whose prosperity had given them the special privilege of being interred here. Only once in the thirty-six hours I cowered in that room did I push aside the stone lids to behold them, both repulsed and fascinated.

There I sat, shivering, with only a few lentils and almost no water, passing in and out of consciousness. Sometime around midday I awoke from a thin sleep to hear the march of footfalls on the street above as what may have been the final formation left the city. After that, there was silence except for an occasional shout.

Night fell six hours ago. I emerged from the catacombs, left the cathedral, and stood under a full moon, the army I had fought for long gone. I would not be missed or searched for, I was sure. I felt drawn to the plain to the west of the Moscow River, and so I went there, following thousands of footprints and wheel ruts that will soon be covered by the snow. I was fortunate enough to come across an overturned cart on which had been piled rags, sheets, and clothing that had been deloused by the Second Reserve Cavalry. Two Russians were picking through it, paying no mind to me. I wrapped some of the remnants around myself, and when I was done I believed I appeared little like a soldier, though I felt barely warmer for it. To an old woman selling the last of her possessions on the street, I offered my own last coins for a lantern, oil, and cotton, wrapping it all carefully.

Beyond the canal, there was an abandoned factory whose west side faced the plain, and I entered it through the open space where a pair of great latticed doors had once stood guard before toppling inward. The factory stretched three floors high. Its machinery had long since stopped functioning. Complicated hulks of wood and iron sat useless and in disrepair. It felt as if I had merely entered another dank tomb. The floors were strewn with all manner of detritus. I heard the echo of scurrying rats and the dripping of water through sundry gaps in the walls and eroded pipes. Not a single window was intact. Two great holes had formed in the high ceiling under the aggregate of snow, wind, and rain. I intended to find a room inside this vast

sepulchre and rest, and then at dawn I would once again rise with no plan beyond surviving the next day.

But as I traversed a corridor which seemed like a route into an assemblage of offices and store rooms, I heard a disturbance somewhere high above: the unmistakable swift clacking of a horse's hooves across a hard surface, tinged with the reverberation of vast hollow space. The sound faded, re-emerged, faded again as the unseen beast made its way from one point to another, seeming to neither approach nor depart.

I unwrapped the lantern and prepared it. Once aglow, I felt exposed somehow, and at first did not have the fortitude to advance. Then the hooves sounded again, much closer, but still above me. For nearly a quarter of an hour I remained motionless as I listened to its halting and confused progress within the factory's labyrinth of shadows. I attempted to slowly focus on whether it seemed to be trying to descend further, and eventually I judged it had found itself on the ground floor.

Spellbound, I went further down the corridor. An intersection presented me with a view down a much longer one. It led back towards the factory's central production space. I set the lantern on the floor and unslung my rifle. I had three shots left to me, no more.

I heard nothing for a time except the sighing of the wind beyond the factory's walls and that interminable dripping of water. Then the horse I could not see was heard to furiously gallop a marked distance, which could only mean it was crossing the production floor. But I could not grasp how to get there. The hooves stopped once again. I fixed my gaze on the end of the long thin corridor.

The gray beast appeared there and disappeared in an instant, before I could even set my rifle's aim. Still, there was no mistaking it for anything but the demon that had attacked myself and Oiseau. I saw the arrow still protruding from its side. However, something was strikingly different about the horse now. It carried a sizeable weight on its back whose details I wasn't able to distinguish. The sound of its progress maddeningly faded once again.

If I were to go down that long corridor, I feared there would be no way to maneuver out of it in the dreadful event that the horse returned and charged. Whether the rooms to the left and right were sealed and locked, I could not know without exploring further. I looked down at the lantern and wondered whether it was an attractor or repellent to the beast. The sense that it was searching for me felt unassailable.

I decided to progress, the lantern in my left hand, the rifle in my right. The rooms all around me were indeed locked tight. I kicked a glass bottle as I moved and cringed at the echo, for there seemed to be causation between it and the sound of the horse repositioning itself far away, perhaps turning. I had committed myself to a path and did not shy from it. The lantern showed me writing in the dust on the wall to my left. My Russian was poor as ever, but I believe the words were ones of infantile hatred toward some long-vanquished nation.

The end of the corridor opened indirectly onto the production floor. I was back where I had begun. The lantern afforded me a vision only of what lay five metres ahead of me.

I moved with great deliberation amongst the machinery. Aborted samples of its output were laid out on tables: smoothbore muskets, with flints and lock plates piled in barrels. I had begun

to shiver gently and was unable to stop. It caused the lantern to produce the small noise of glass trembling against wood.

I finally stopped and remained in one place, and I think perhaps the days of cold and hunger and loneliness had finally rendered me mad, for I believe I sang aloud a snatch of song from my school days, a few halting lines about a father and son setting out on a hunt on the first day of the season, my voice, feeble with exhaustion, mangling the simple melody. The light of the lantern had held steady on a tall machine shrouded by gauzy, moth-eaten linen, and now what I believed to have been merely a knob or dial jutting out from that intricate mass was clearly a filmy, gawking eye, part of a hulk that had been standing there all along, watching me, calculating. I heard the horse's breath then, labored and sick. I dropped the lantern and the horse bucked, its entire body visible as yellow light sprayed outward and then died just as quickly. In raising my rifle, it discharged. There was another flash of light as a bullet left the chamber. Instead of attacking me the gray horse wailed, twisted, and fled directly for the open gap in the side of the building. Before it became little more than a black phantom silhouetted against the plain, I saw more closely the burden it carried on its back.

It was Private Meffre, whose stare was hollow and dull-witted, and who swooned and almost toppled over, having no agency over his own limbs. He had lashed himself to the beast's neck and midsection with multiple coils of rope. The horse was unable to shake this dying transient.

I realized what I would do at once. I bolted for the stairwell that would bring me to the second and then third floor of the factory, charging recklessly up the steps in the dark. A corridor no more than three meters wide spanned the length of the place high above, and panting like the animal that had confronted me, I ran for one of the dozen broken windows through which the moonlight fell. It was so much colder up there with the wind blowing in that my teeth chattered uncontrollably.

The gray horse galloped through the falling snow onto the plain that stretched into the blackness where the Emperor's army had marched hours before, and then it suddenly stopped, perhaps feeling it had safely escaped danger, or perhaps gathering the will for a malevolent return. Puppet-like and possessing no strength, Meffre merely clung to his new master's reins. Perhaps he had hoped it would protect him from death, but he was too far gone.

The horse's full length was presented to my aim. I pointed the rifle through the window gap and to steady my rebellious hands, rested the barrel gently on a jutting V created by the pattern of shards of broken glass. My breath curled before me.

Seconds before I fired, another shadow appeared out there. Someone was walking through the snow, having no coat for protection against the cold, attempting to slowly approach the horse. Her hands remained low at her sides, her palms upward in a gesture of humility, as of presenting alms.

It was the young Russian girl who had spoken curses to me. The horse eyed her apprehensively. Yet it allowed her ever closer. Step by careful step, she approached it in a way no one had found the grace to attempt. But if she hoped to tame it with her good will, she knew less of life and locked hearts than even I. When she got within arm's length of the horse, its head convulsed in the spasmodic, afflicted manner I had seen before, it bucked, and it ran from her into the darkness, carrying Meffre away. Just as I could see the color of her hair in the moonlight, I could see the animal's pain, could sense its angry passion fading.

I went out there when it was gone, and took what rags I could off my body and placed them on the girl. She was too depleted now to condemn me. We left the factory and made our way back to the place she had followed me from. Soon enough, we could walk by the light of the ceaseless fires that had taken her birthplace away from her.

Paranormal Appraisal 151

STEWART SANGRID

My name is Stewart Sangrid. I am a department chair in chemistry at Alexandria University in North Carolina, and for twenty-three years I've been head of the parapsychology lab here. The recording which follows was made by myself on November 4, 1998. I'd long made a habit of surreptitiously taping my interviews with those whose premises I investigated in the course of his studies for the purposes of listening later to determine the owners' authentic mental state. On this, the day of my retirement from the university, I submit this tape to the archives in the hopes it will be educational to those who come after me.

(A grainy recording. A door is heard to open.)

SANGRID

Hello?

PAULA

Hello.... I'm in here, in the living room.

SANGRID

Ms. Vargell?

PAULA

That's right. Come in.

SANGRID

Thank you. Stewart Sangrid.

PAULA

Oh, you might not want to come any closer—on top of all that's going on, I'm on the tail end of the flu.

SANGRID

Oh, my.

PAULA

Yeah, it's been rough. I feel better just having you here.

SANGRID

That's understandable. Foul night, it got real cold.

PAULA

So... today's been a quiet day. Last night too, but the incidents tend to cluster.

SANGRID

Did you make the list I asked about? Of the three things?

PAULA

Yeah, I did. In my head, I mean, but I have all the facts. Here, sit down, sorry...

SANGRID

Thank you.

PAULA

Should I go over it?

SANGRID

Please.

PAULA

From most explainable to least explainable, that was the instruction, right?

SANGRID

Yes.

PAULA

How come you do it this way?

SANGRID

I find that when people make a list and rank the incidents in terms of how rationally they might be explained, it helps them sort through the possibilities. A lot of people come to realize there's no need for me to come, and they feel better, and they stop being scared.

PAULA

Okay, I get it. Okay... let me think. All right. Um, the first thing that ever happened... about two weeks after I moved in, it was just these feelings of panic, of disorientation... chills down my spine, depression... waking up feeling something was trying to get at me. Something totally undefined. It all started very suddenly. I started measuring my heart rate. It spiked sometimes.

SANGRID

And it's continued since the beginning?

PAULA

Yes.

SANGRID

Mmmm. Is there an airport nearby, or a factory, or... an industrial complex, something like that?

PAULA

There's... I guess there's a power grid about four miles east of here, does that count?

SANGRID

Maybe. Sometimes—not too often—these symptoms are caused by infrasound. Sounds at a frequency so low, or so high, that human beings can't hear them, but the vibrations can disturb your system in all sorts of ways. The thinking these days is that infrasound waves emerging from the reaction of high winds against rock caused the Dyatlov Pass hikers to panic and flee from their tents and freeze to death. Have you ever heard of that case, back in the late fifties?

PAULA

I have, actually. Infrasound... interesting.

SANGRID

Not that that's certainly the explanation; it's just an example of explainable phenomena causing some very scary effects. Even a ceiling fan at a certain setting can have negative infrasound effects, even in our sleep, if the curvature of the walls nearby is a certain way.

PAULA

Wow. Okay, that's good to know.

I should talk about the presence next. That began a month ago. The feeling of something being very close to me. When I lay in bed, sometimes when I walked from... actually, I'll show you.

SANGRID

Okay...

They get up and walk.

PAULA

This room in here.

They stop in a small room.

PAULA

It's pretty bad in here sometimes.

SANGRID

What does it feel like?

PAULA

I want to say it feels like it's a presence above me, but once in a while, it's all around.

SANGRID

How long does it last?

PAULA

Ten, fifteen seconds.

SANGRID

Any particular time of day?

PAULA

No, it's... random. What do you think?

SANGRID

I'm not sure. Electromagnetic fields can create the perception of a presence. They fool the temporal lobes. They don't have to be very strong. The fields linger in certain types of building materials, so that might align with the fact that it's stronger in certain rooms. I'd have to take some measurements.

PAULA

It *really* feels like a *presence*, though—

SANGRID

Oh, it wouldn't feel like static, or electricity. You would perceive it as a presence.

PAULA

Power lines?

SANGRID

Not so much. We could be talking even about the water table below your house conducting something. Storms in the area might cause the fields to settle for days if the house has flaws to conduct them.

PAULA

Okay. Being in the living room, did you feel anything?

SANGRID

I did. I did. But to be responsible, I can't trust those feelings. Again, it's important to rule out rational explanations.

PAULA

What was it that you were feeling?

SANGRID

I think I know what you mean by a presence. I can sense... *something* in the house. I usually perceive it in my fingertips, actually. But sometimes another human form alone can skew the perceptions of these phenomena. We could be corrupting each other's senses just by standing here, in other words.

PAULA

All right.

SANGRID

You mentioned faces.

PAULA

I did. That's what I'm having the most trouble with. That would be at the top of my list, I suppose. Here, let's go in the bedroom, where it happened...

Twice now I've been lying here in my bed, late at night. The lights were off. I was awake. The first time, I was looking at my closet there, the door was open. And I saw kind of a faint white oval about six feet off the ground. I tried to blink it away, but it stayed there, and little by little it developed... features. And I saw it was a face. And its mouth was moving, saying words, but no sound came out. I was frozen. After about thirty seconds of this, I felt something touch my leg under the covers, and I screamed and ran out of the room. How would you explain that?

SANGRID

Well... that sounds pretty scary, I'll grant you. Was the face male or female?

PAULA

Oh boy... it's tough to say.

SANGRID

You say you were definitely awake?

PAULA

Yeah.

SANGRID

How long does it usually take to you to get to sleep?

PAULA

You know... fifteen, twenty minutes...

SANGRID

But that night was longer?

PAULA

Yeah.

SANGRID

How come?

PAULA

Not sure.

You have something in mind.

SANGRID

Do you know what sleep paralysis is?

PAULA

Sleep paralysis...

SANGRID

It's a breakdown in how the body moves between the first or last stages of sleep. Sometimes there's a split-second difference between the body falling asleep or waking up and the mind following. In that split second, there's a triggered response, an elevated heart rate... there can be hallucinations. Stories of alien abduction are caused by it a lot. The sleeper believes he or she saw or experienced something real, but the mind and body had simply become disconnected for one brief moment before syncing up again. It's absolutely terrifying. Did it feel like you couldn't move when you saw the face?

PAULA

I just don't think I tried.

SANGRID

How about the second incident?

PAULA

It was also late at night. But I *know* I wasn't asleep, because I was over there at my desk. I had the lamp on, it was about one in the morning. I had been feeling strange all day, actually, that sense of presence... I was writing in my journal, the radio was playing very low. The door coming in was open about halfway. And I heard a voice say my name. Like a genderless voice. And I turned and right there, in the corner of the room, I saw a hand on the doorknob, it was reaching in from outside the room. I saw most of the arm too. It was like the person who owned the voice was warning me it was about to come in, and it had hesitated outside until it knew I was watching.

SANGRID

Didn't see the person?

PAULA

No. That made it worse somehow. Just this arm, and the hand on the knob.

SANGRID

Do you remember anything about it, any physical details?

PAULA

God yes. The arm was really thin, and the sleeve on it was sort of ruffled, kind of like old clothing looks like. And the hand was very bony... pale. And I screamed, I screamed so loud my neighbor came, but even after I screamed it was still there. Then when I got up out of the chair, it vanished.

SANGRID

Did you lose sight of it for a second when you got up out of the chair, and then when you looked again—

PAULA

A little bit, yeah.

SANGRID

All it said was your name? Paula?

PAULA

No, it called me Pill. Pill is a nickname I used to have, but way back in elementary school.

SANGRID

Who knows that name?

PAULA

A few people in my family, a couple of kid friends. I got it from my friend Ginny. She died about twenty years go.

SANGRID

Did you recognize the voice?

PAULA

Not at all. I hope you're not going to tell me that was sound waves.

SANGRID

No, but... the range of possibility is immense. There have been supposed hauntings explained away by carbon monoxide leaks, believe it or not, or mold. The brain gets polluted in a way it's never been polluted before. Irrational fears, dementia, visions, noises in the walls. It's been conditioned to think of certain stimuli as supernatural, so when it encounters them for the first time, the effect is intense. If you think of the name you heard... it's one syllable. Your mind could have literally scheduled you to be fooled at the first sound similar to it.

PAULA

Yeah, but... the arm...

SANGRID

You said you were awake, not even in bed. But it could be that you were sleeping all along. Have you been to a doctor, had a full workup?

PAULA

No.

SANGRID

I'd recommend first a sleep series, which is expensive, it involves a CAT scan and a couple of overnight stays, but it can be done through the university hospital. There might be something there.

PAULA

I guess you have an explanation for everything.

SANGRID

I just believe in eliminating the probable before we start to look at the *improbable*.

PAULA

Have you ever found a real haunting then, or is it all just... blips in reason?

SANGRID

I can't call anything I've seen a real haunting, no, but that's not to say these incidents aren't worth deep investigation. We keep learning more and more about the environment, man-made wrinkles in energy fields, the human imagination, the human nervous system. It's all valuable and I don't want to discount your experience in any way.

PAULA

I should show you one more thing, though, come into the bathroom.

SANGRID

Sure.

They walk, settle.

PAULA

Here we go. Sorry, I need to keep the light off, so you can imagine this better. If you... stand there... right here...

SANGRID

Okay...

PAULA

And... you look in the mirror... and you just keep looking... you might see something. I'd be interested to know if you can explain it right off, or if it'll make you think differently.

SANGRID

All right. When on the timeline did this phenomenon occur?

PAULA

It didn't yet. This is a new thing.

SANGRID

How do you mean?

PAULA

Well... you see how I'm standing right behind you?

SANGRID

Yeah.

PAULA

We're real close now. I bet if you think about it... you'll realize that you can't sense my presence. Like I'm not even here.

No... don't try to speak. You won't be able to right now.

Just keep staring in the mirror.

And now... *there.*

How did I suddenly become *this* thing? How did I become myself but... looking like I've been in my grave for decades?

Is *that* explainable, Mr. Sangrid?

Thank you for sharing your information on what you believe I *might* be. It's fascinating. Paula would have been fascinated to hear it too, if she hadn't fled tonight to stay at her sister's, poor thing.

When you... unlock... you'll be out on the road, and not sure how you've got there. I think you should go home then. And don't come back until you've learned some respect.

By the way, the Dyatlov Pass hikers weren't scared by *infrasound*.

Goodbye.

excursion

My name is Abraham Tolchin. I feel a little bewildered and sad tonight because a friend just emailed me a link to some grainy video footage of a town council meeting where I got up and spoke exactly twenty-one years ago. I live in Silversmith, New Hampshire, population eight thousand, give or take. There was really only one subject on the agenda that mattered that night, and it was the reason I attended, the public having been invited to share their views. In my allotted few minutes, I argued against the proposal to change Silversmith's name three hundred years after its incorporation by the British. And then, before my emotions overwhelmed me, I left out a side door. The issue was scheduled to go to a vote one week from that night, and frankly it didn't look good for my side, who I guess could have been called the traditionalists. The thinking around town was that what happened on August 3rd, 1997, and the ensuing unwelcome media attention it had brought to Silversmith, was simply too great an obstacle for it to get past from without an act of reidentification, of purification. There had already been a book about what happened, a documentary for television... without at least a new name, most people thought, the stain would last forever. I thought my special status that night would give my words more weight, so I did the one thing I hate more than anything else: stand at a microphone and speak to a room full of strangers.

At nine a.m. on that August day in 1997, a somewhat ramshackle white rental bus pulled up to the curb beside the Lurie Building on the campus of Silversmith Community College, which I myself had attended for a couple of semesters about three years before. Driving the bus was a man named Stanley Survinski, age fifty-five. Survinski was a former ranch hand, bait shop worker, and welterweight boxer who for the last ten years had worked the customer service counter at the Safeway in the middle of town. He was known for his very booming laugh and

for dressing up festively at work for every possible occasion, everything from Halloween to the 4th of July to Thanksgiving to Valentine's Day.

In 1993 he'd purchased a secondhand rental bus from a defunct river tubing business, and he began to make money setting up various day excursions to college football games, theme parks, and festivals, advertising mostly to students and employees of the community college through their bulletin boards, and scooping up other customers with notices posted at the grocery store and the town library. He'd get forty or fifty people on the bus, give them sodas and pack lunches, and offer a round trip from the college parking lot in the morning to make a couple hundred bucks on a Saturday. Single and with no family left, Survinski had to eke out a living any way he could. For his bus trip business, he had no formal setup or even business cards, and its name kept changing according to his whims. In 1996 it was referred to in his paper notices as both Sunrise Regional Touring and Express Recreation, and by January of 1997 it had become Sunrise Highway Excursions. His name never appeared on the notices, though he always handled the phone reservations and drove the bus himself.

If anyone had bothered to follow the pattern of Survinski's trips since their beginning, they would have become aware that the August 1997 excursion was a little different. He was offering not just a round trip jaunt to the beach at Wallis Sands State Park, but he'd rented out a large picnic shelter beside the water to host a cookout, complete with cash bar starting at noon. As a bonus, the bus would take customers to their destination through scenic private land owned by the Beverly Steffen Estate, affording some nice views the general public rarely got.

The trip got a very good response. This time there was not just one, but three departure times: at eight, ten, and noon. Survinski had rented two additional buses for this excursion. The only stipulation was that this was not considered a family outing, involving alcohol as it did. In fact, there was to be some drinking allowed on the bus itself, so no one under eighteen was to be allowed. The price was reasonable and all in all, there were to be one hundred and forty-one paying customers split among the three departure times. Because the skies were a little dark with spatters of rain forecast, there were some last-minute cancellations and no-shows. Cars crept into Lot C3 at the otherwise empty community college on Saturday morning.

You would have had to possess a very unusual interest indeed in the logistics of this trip to look into Sunrise Highway Excursions and find out who Survinski had hired to drive the additional two buses. The answer was no one. He intended to make all three roundtrip runs himself. But this would be theoretically impossible, since the trip to the beach at Wallis Sands via his advertised route through the Steffen acreage would take about an hour and ten minutes, leaving him not enough time to get back for the next scheduled pickup.

It didn't make sense. But what no one knew was that Survinski had no intention of getting all the way to the beach before he turned around and headed back for more people. As for the rental of the picnic shelter and the setting up of a cash bar, those things weren't real either.

The first bus left at precisely eight o'clock, carrying thirty-two passengers, the lightest scheduled load of the day. Standing at the retracting doors, Survinski checked their names off his list silently, accepting their \$25 in cash or check, and offering little more than a nod of acknowledgement. When everyone was seated, he got on the creaky PA system and gave a dry recitation of the obligatory safety instructions and let everyone know that there were two

coolers set up on the front seats, containing soda, water, beer, and wine coolers, and once they were underway, people could walk forward and grab something. Chips and cookies and apples were in separate plastic tubs beside the drinks. He finished by welcoming everyone aboard but it was little more than subdued verbal punctuation, a marked contrast to the usual demeanor he showed at Safeway, where customers needing to exchange something or get a rain check would always be greeted with a trivia question he hand-lettered every day on a small chalkboard. If you got the question right or wrong, he would laugh heartily and you could have either a lollipop or a bite-sized candy bar. On his bus trips, he normally liked to do a bit of jovial patter, or make a joke about how everyone should wear their seatbelts until the plane was safely in the air.

The bus pulled out onto Barco Street and the excursion was on its way. My apartment back then overlooked the street, and I actually saw the eight o'clock bus roll by as I walked down my hallway toward the shower. My friend Vance and I were scheduled to be on the ten o'clock run.

The private Steffen acreage that Stanley Survinski drove his passengers toward consisted of twenty-two hilly square miles of forest with just a single unmarked road cutting through. A planned nature preserve had run into various obstacles over the last twenty years and the land had lain unused and unspoiled since 1964. It had no actual summer caretaker, and all that kept the public out were warning signs and a short, locked swinging fence at either end of the weather-beaten access road. When the bus approached that fence at about 8:25 a.m., Survinski reminded his passengers that through special arrangement with the Steffen estate, they would be allowed through, and while there were no designated overlooks or stopping points, the views would be quite nice. The bus rolled at about ten miles per hour between the fence posts.

A later examination of Stanley Survinski's finances in late summer of 1997 revealed that his bank account had been dented more significantly than usual a few times in the days leading up to the excursion to Wallis Sands. In addition to leasing two new buses, he had rented a car from a local dealer three days beforehand. Two days before that, he'd purchased a 1985 Ford Escort for four hundred dollars in cash from a private citizen living on Phipps Avenue. Both of those cars were now parked under some trees at approximately the midpoint of the access road that ran through the Steffen acreage. The bus began to wind and climb toward that spot as the passengers looked out at the summer scenery.

Just twenty-five minutes later or so, right around the time the bus should have been leaving the acreage on the east side and getting onto Route 1 to finish the trip toward the beach, Stanley Survinski was instead climbing into the old Ford Escort he'd purchased on July 29 and starting to drive back to the lot at Silversmith Community College for his ten o'clock run. The bus in which he and his thirty-two passengers had entered the Steffen property was now nowhere to be seen.

In Silversmith, I was leaving a phone message for my friend Vance, who was sleeping off a night of partying. I told him I'd pick him up from his group house on Victor Street at nine-thirty. I had reserved two spots on that ten o'clock bus. After another depressing week at my job at the print shop around the corner, I was ready for a day of relaxing, eating, and drinking at Wallis Sands.

There was a railyard beside Barco Street where freight from the New England Central Railroad still passed through every other day. In one section of that yard, a few ancient freight cars that hadn't moved for years sat ghostly in the weeds. Some of them were speckled with graffiti but three in particular stood out for the elaborate and accidental murals one Silversmith resident had graced them with.

Her name was Tanisha Draper, and in 1997 she was nine years old. *Looks like Tanisha's been at it again*, was the only sentence that Vance spoke to me as we drove to the parking lot at the community college shortly before ten. Thoroughly hung over, he squinted as if her giant loops of orange, yellow, and pink hurt his eyes.

Tanisha, developmentally disabled, had begun her work on the trains under the watchful eye of her father, James, a plant supervisor for Goodwin Foods. She loved drawing and never wanted to go anywhere without her big bucket of chalk. She drew on sidewalks, road signs, even mailboxes if James wasn't totally on watch. The old freight cars presented an open, abandoned canvas, so as they went past the railyard on their walks, he let her stop to draw clouds and horses and a very plump superhero she called Stockpaper on the gray and brown metal, which got very hot in summertime. She drew images bigger than she herself was, and the bigger she drew, the more James and others came to realize that she had been gifted with unusual talent and a distinctive style that made everything from houses to animals to people somehow look like they were constructed from big happy balloons, puffing out and expanding in all directions.

One day a railworker came over to shoo Tanisha away from the freight cars she'd chosen to decorate, but James was able to convince him no real harm was being done to these old relics, and so she was allowed to continue. There was next to no chance the cars would ever be used again; they were just rusting scrap bearing the name of some company based in Georgia that was struggling to survive a bankruptcy filing. No one even mowed the weeds in that lot anymore. Sometimes rain washed away much of what Tanisha had done, making her sad, and so one day her mother bought her an acrylic paint set, which she took to immediately. Her work continued apace.

She could not know then that I, one of only four haunted survivors of August 3, 1997, would two years later use her innocent work to publicly fight against the re-naming of the town both she and I had grown up in.

My friend Vance Thorn was one of the world's great imbibers, that was for sure. As we drove along toward the community college parking lot at twenty to ten he was already at it again after his night of debauchery, sipping from a can of Bud Light he kept balanced between his knees as he tied his hair back in a ponytail. Always a jocular fellow, he got ever more so as he drank, so everyone forgave him his habits. At the age of twenty, I did too; what did I know of the damage he was doing to himself.

At the parking lot the second excursion bus of the day was already idling, a blue and white thing with the word *Seahawk* on the side of it in flowing script. Plenty of passengers had taken their seats for the run. There was one car parked right beside the bus. This was the green Ford Escort

Stanley Survinski had so recently acquired and used to make the trip back from one of the highest points in the Steffen acreage.

Survinski checked off our names and nodded us on board soundlessly, taking my cash and tucking it into a zipper pouch secured to his waist. I can honestly say I was within twelve inches of the man: my claim to fame maybe. He was short and stocky, with black hair from which the gray had been crudely expunged with dye in places. He had a faint scar on his right cheek from a drunken sparring accident back in the day. I got a smell of licorice coming off him. A few drops of rain hit the roof of the bus as Vance and I took our seats in the back row; it had everyone a little concerned about the forecast.

We were late pulling off the lot for some reason. Survinski was pacing in front of the bus as if deep in thought, seemingly unaware that time was slipping away. Finally he got on and droned through the announcements. Something a little odd happened when he tried to say “chips and cookies and apples”; he couldn’t get the words out on the first, second, or third try, slurring them together in a mash as if he were a bit drugged. Slumped down in the seat beside me, hiding under his baseball cap, Vance gave me a quizzical look and elaborately stroked his scraggly blonde beard, one of the many affectations he’d adopted to seem more like a tortured poet and less like an underemployed waiter. We’d both dropped out of UNH at the same time and neither of us had taken any real steps yet toward a consideration of our foggy future beyond convincing each other we were on the verge of founding an experimental theater company that would rock the world. Survinski took his seat and the bus began to move.

A woman sitting just ahead of me turned her head back and said *Is there something wrong with that guy?* It took a moment for me to realize I was the one she was asking, and she was referring to our driver’s verbal difficulties. I shrugged. I could see Survinski’s face in the long rearview mirror, his eyes staring intently at the road ahead of him.

The day before, his boss had asked him if everything was all right, since he hadn’t dressed up that day as usual in honor of the anniversary of Silversmith’s founding; he usually put on an elaborate pilgrim’s costume for it complete with silly purple hat. Survinski said he simply forgot. Later that night, well past dark, he was seen wearing that costume by a neighbor, just sitting on the front porch of his tiny house with an odd look on his face, a “trance-like look,” she said. Before he’d left Safeway he’d written three strange words on the chalkboard propped upon the customer service desk instead of his usual trivia question. The words said: *Won’t stop asking.*

When Vance had staggered back to his seat from the front of the bus, where he’d fetched us a couple of cans of Coors, he expressed some frustration that there was probably no cell service at Wallis Sands. A friend of ours, Gretchen Kind, a Swarthmore student home for the summer, had been on the eight o’clock bus and was supposed to have called one of us to let us know she’d gotten there and had picked out a spot on the beach for us. Her first voicemail to Vance at about ten after eight confirming she was aboard had come through to him, but nothing since. I didn’t even have a cellphone at the time; most people didn’t, as I recall.

Survinski drove us toward the entrance to the Steffen acreage; we’d be there in about twenty minutes. He had never gotten any sort of permission to go through it, as he’d claimed. He had merely gotten up before dawn on August 3rd to cut the old locks from the gates in the dark, open them up, and tie them off. No one would ever really be sure how much research and care he’d applied to make himself feel confident that the buses wouldn’t be spotted by someone and

stopped, but initially, at least, he achieved his desired outcome. Nobody saw the first bus enter the area, and no one would see our ten o'clock bus part the gates either.

The last chance anyone really had to talk to Survinski and perhaps realize he was thinking of doing the impossible, the inconceivable, was three nights before. A bartender at a dive called The Point two miles outside the town limits saw him come in around nine o'clock and take a seat in his usual booth. Survinski had for the last week or so made the night bartender, Nolan Garcia, just a little uncomfortable. They'd always exchanged a few words and Survinski was always good for a clean and enjoyably terrible joke or a funny story about his days as a boxer. He'd sit alone and nurse two or three beers for a couple of hours, reading one of the many magazines he subscribed to, magazines about woodworking or sports. But recently all the conversation had stopped, and the man seemed distant and preoccupied.

On the night of July 31, Survinski did allow himself to be drawn into a short exchange, and revealed that he was thinking of leaving Safeway because of money worries. In fact, he'd been offered a really good job opportunity.

Oh, doing what? Garcia asked politely. *With a baker,* came the reply. Garcia asked him where that would be, Was there a shop somewhere that he might know? To this, Survinski could not fully reply. He said he hadn't been told. And it wasn't totally a sure thing, because, he told the bartender, she wanted him to do something for him first, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to. Garcia left it at that.

At a little before ten, Garcia noticed that Survinski had been standing at the exit for several minutes, just looking out the window at the parking lot and the street beyond. He'd had to step aside a couple of times to let patrons in. Garcia had a free moment so he went over and, standing behind Survinski, asked him what he was looking at.

She came here, he replied. Garcia assumed he was talking about the baker mentioned before. He looked through the window as well, but saw nothing but a couple of cars in the lot next door, the side of a laundromat, and the empty intersection beyond. *She just went behind that building,* Survinski said. *Got her outfit on and everything.* Garcia asked him why she would be doing that, why she'd be sneaking around. Survinski seemed afraid, and never turning from the window, he now wanted to know if Garcia had told her where he could be found.

The question was ludicrous on a couple of levels, so Garcia could only shrug it off and walk away nervously, leaving his customer to continue to stand there, watching and waiting, for another several minutes. Finally Survinski opened the door and made as if to leave. Garcia called a good night out to him. Survinski turned and before exiting muttered something about really needing the job bad. Then he was out into the night.

Investigators were never able to find out just what the man had been talking about. Left unanswered also was the question of who, if anyone, had assisted Survinski in getting back to town from the spot where he stowed the newly acquired cars. There were no fingerprints inside them but his own.

Coincidentally, one of The Point's regulars was a high school basketball coach who was also a friend of James Draper, Tanisha Draper's father. This coach told James he had made reservations for a bus trip to Wallis Sands that upcoming Saturday and couldn't go after all, so maybe he could take his little girl there for the day. The tickets were already paid for. The only problem was that no one under eighteen seemed to be allowed. James Draper accepted the gift of the tickets anyway, figuring that he'd likely be able to talk the bus operator into letting Tanisha on. But he wasn't quite sure if she'd rather not just go to the zoo that Saturday for seemingly the hundredth time, or maybe back to the railyard to work on her drawings.

The spatters of rain continued off and on as Route 33 became Nelson Road, which climbed gently into the hills bordering the Steffen acreage. The old tour bus chugged and groaned as it fought the very gradual incline. Vance was telling me about a bartender he'd fallen for the night before and his woefully misguided attempts to hit on her, which involved foolishly quizzing her on Star Wars trivia. I laughed. But I was a little uneasy. I would sometimes look toward the front of the bus at the wide rearview mirror that angled down and afforded me a view of just a section of the driver's face as Survinski stared out intently at the road. He was sweating so much, despite the AC.

We turned onto a quiet side road that was having some obvious drainage problems and from there took a left onto something called Loggerdale Run. Immediately the trees grew taller and we were swallowed up in the forest. Fairly quickly we came to what I assumed was the entrance to the Steffen acreage, purchased in 1960 by the Steffen family, owners of the largest dairy and sweet corn farms in the state and engaged in many philanthropic pursuits. There were neither homes nor buildings of any kind on the acreage. The bus bumped over a few potholes and past the open gate, painted yellow. The road ahead was twisty and rose into the hills fast. On the right and left, the light was mostly blotted out for a full minute as the trees grew so much closer in.

The access road had obviously been built for only one way traffic, though a second vehicle could have squeezed by on our left. There was a shoulder only the width of a queen-sized mattress, and as we climbed to a noticeably higher elevation where a wide stream came into view below us, I noticed there was no guardrail separating us from a prominent descent. The bus was kept at an even twenty miles per hour or so and Survinski's eyes never left the pavement.

I watched him. He seemed to be talking to himself. I got little glimpses of his mouth as he drove. Sometimes he shook his head left and right very suddenly as if shaking away an insect.

We leveled off for a time and saw the pretty view, hundreds of thousands of birch, beech and ashwood trees stretching to the north, and a big cutout about three quarters of a mile away with a quiet pond at its center. Around dusk, when the last return trip of the night would happen, it would be a nice photograph. A winding dirt path led outward from the clearing and snaked elaborately through the forest, a path so thin it looked like it could only be walked or bicycled. But of course there was no one on it. In fact, it turned out that the vast Steffen acreage had not been trod upon by any living person for at least two weeks, not counting possible trespassers. Which is exactly what we were, but only one of us on the bus knew it.

Vance told me he really needed to get some more sleep, and he sort of dissolved deeper into his seat, uninterested in seeing a tiny section of the state he'd probably accidentally hiked on at some point. He was also the most tanned person I knew because of his constant outdoor exploits. I stretched my legs out into the aisle, trying to get comfortable.

Only eight minutes later, by my calculation, we had reached the high point of the access road. The valley spread out before us. Some on the bus were snapping a picture or two, but most were still happy to just talk among themselves and enjoy the free snacks and booze. I remember a young blonde couple up front laughing constantly with each other, their hair so light it almost seemed white. Across the aisle from Vance and I were two women talking conspiratorially about how to go about disinviting their brother to their upcoming Labor Day picnic. I remember an older guy in a Talking Heads T-shirt who had come alone making two different trips to get Doritos and Diet Pepsi, both times almost losing his haul because a sudden bump in the road caused his grip to slip. Both times he swore under his breath. There was, finally, one giddily nervous comment from someone about the absence of a guardrail. It came from the woman in front of me who had wondered aloud back at the start if the driver was OK.

The bus slowed, and then our driver was pulling over. There was a bit of a wide patch on our left, a natural turnaround spot, and Survinski stopped us there, leaving the engine idling. The immediate assumption was, at least by me, that we were going to stretch our legs maybe and be urged to take more pictures. The valley looked nice if a little threatening, something that would devour us quickly if we hiked down into it. At that moment we were at an elevation point eighteen hundred feet above, say, the parking lot at Silversmith Community College. Survinski got up from his seat, still sweating a lot, pushed the doors of the bus outward, left us, and pushed the doors closed again behind him without so much as a word. In rising, he had to step around an object I hadn't noticed before: a small cardboard box packed tight with hardcover books, very close to the gas pedal. I could see it perfectly, looking right down the long aisle. It had no significance for me or for anyone.

When he left the bus many of the passengers looked at each other, a bit confused. Was there a mechanical problem maybe? Beside me, Vance opened his eyes and straightened up. He said, *The precious sleep of Dracula has been disturbed once again*, and peered out the window on his right, at the closest copse of trees set into the rising hill.

It was tough to see Survinski very well from where I was, so far in the back. A little nervous that the bus was idling, driverless, so close to such a steep dropoff with no guardrail, I actually stood up beside my seat and prepared to walk forward to see what he was doing. Then I heard a gasp on my left; a young woman in a straw hat had seen something out the window on that side. Someone else saw it too. And then I did, peering past the two sisters across the aisle from me.

The view was obscured slightly by thin runnels left behind by sparse raindrops which had crawled like spiders down the windows. Hundreds of feet down below, the front half of a white bus could be seen partially obscured among the trees, lying on its side, motionless, broken and ruined.

I heard the bus doors open again and saw Survinski appear. He was keeping low. Two men toward the front of the bus had risen and were starting to walk forward. But you must remember, the first two rows had no passengers because of the coolers there on the seats, so those men were not as close to the front as they could have been. It had likely been part of Survinski's careful design. He didn't even come all the way up the exit steps; instead he

stretched forward and used his upper body strength to quickly lift the box of books, shoving them in one motion so that they weighed hard upon the gas pedal. I heard the old engine rev. Now my view forward was blocked by multiple people who had risen from their seats and moved into the aisle.

But it was too late. There was a thunk, and the bus gave a great lurch forward as Survinski threw the bus into drive even as he pulled away and cast his weight backward against the doors of the bus. The people in the aisle lost their balance, and so did I, grabbing the headrest beside me. I saw Vance, now fully alarmed, trying to look everywhere at once.

When the stories of the three other survivors of that day were collected and transcribed, it was revealed that Survinski had shown far less hesitation in the final moments of his plan on his first trip, and only on the second did he physically leave the bus for a moment for reasons unknown. Nor had he seemed to talk to himself before or break out into such a copious sweat. On that second run he allowed alarmed passengers to come very close indeed to escaping the bus through the front, or even restraining him. But in the end, he did manage to get out.

Only one person managed to escape through an emergency exit, and that person was me. No matter how many times I replay the sequence of events in my mind, I cannot comprehend how quickly I seemed to grasp what was happening, how fast I calculated the odds on some unconscious level, the speed with which I acted.

The moment I spotted the latch on the rear door I was lunging for it, sensing just how close the bus already was to the precipice. I began to hear screams as I pushed on the latch, designed so simply and intuitively, and the door began to open. As soon it did, there was another dramatic weight shift as the bus struck something—the row of foliage that reached up from beyond the curb, which was enough to impede the bus's progress but not nearly enough to stop it.

I threw myself against the door. I have no memories of anyone attempting to follow me. I can't remember the faces of the two sisters across the aisle, and I know for a fact that I never even turned to look at Vance until I felt myself tumbling out of the bus. The world was already turning upside down and he was only a blur. I felt myself falling; that sensation seemed to last many seconds, although it couldn't have.

I struck the pavement and rolled. A burst of pain went through my shoulder blade. There were more screams as the bus went over the precipice and down, its back end reaching a ghastly vertical angle, then tilting sharply to the left as it descended. I saw that word again painted on the side of it in dark blue: *Seahawk*. Then it seemed to simply vanish. No snapping of trees, no threshing loudly through unseen foliage. Just... gone.

About seven months after the bus excursion, the New Hampshire *Union Leader* sent a reporter to take photographs of the work that little Tanisha Draper had done on the Augusta Thoroughfare Company's freight cars. By then you couldn't help but turn your head whenever you went past the railyard on Barco Street to see that profusion of chaotic colors swarming those poor unassuming hunks of metal and steel. The main photo that ran on page one of the Voices section showed the caped, big-bellied superhero Tanisha called Stockpaper sitting on a grinning horse and jamming a big fork stacked with pancakes into his mouth. Pancakes, explained Tanisha on the rare occasions where she did speak, were what gave Stockpaper the

strength to save the world. There were about two dozen images of Stockpaper festooned across the train cars, either eating pancakes, swooping through the air, or kicking back big ocean waves as they threatened to crash down upon him. He never seemed to fight any personified villains, mostly just oncoming objects and bodies of water. She had also painted bulbous and expanding cats, tennis rackets, mummies, sunflowers, round and ribboned gift boxes devoid of contents, bowls of cereal, and monster trucks wearing sunglasses. Often these images were connected with bands of varying colors drawn line by thin line. If you got close enough, sometimes you'd see these bands were fifty lines thick, like supremely complicated rainbows. Tanisha's father James sometimes brought a stout ladder to the railyard when she wanted to work on her designs so that he could lift her up in aiding her to reach some higher places. The ladders built into the cars themselves were way too dangerous.

The *Union Leader* story began to bring people out to the trains to admire the work and take their own photographs. Some of them hoped to meet the artist, and occasionally their visits coincided with her work periods. Initially, Tanisha seemed confused by the attention and didn't quite make the connection between her artistic efforts and the acclaim shown to her, retreating shyly more often than not to her father's side. But slowly, she began to like it when people came, and sometimes she posed in front of the trains for photos. On weekends, it became uncommon to go past the railyard and not see one or two people checking out the display as it became more elaborate with each passing month.

Soon Tanisha would run out of room. Before that point was reached, the railyard's owner, a surprisingly young man named Dennis DuFray, consulted with the New England Central Railroad and the county about any possible safety issues with what Tanisha was doing. He then informed James Draper that he would have the area around two other dead trains mowed and put on a routine mowing and maintenance schedule. The company would list these and the previously decorated trains as lapsed property instead of selling them for scrap, and keep them insured against damage and accident while installing a few minor safety modifications. And then, he told James, Tanisha would be free to continue her work.

Stanley Survinski was sitting cross-legged on the access road when I regained consciousness twenty or thirty seconds after cracking my head on the pavement. Blood obscured the vision in my left eye. For a time I could only lay there, believing myself paralyzed. Survinski got up and walked slowly to the edge of the cliff. He went beyond my sightline quickly and I couldn't turn my head to follow him. I suppose he thought I must have been dead, or maybe he thought I was alive and wasn't sure what to do about me. I presented a problem, but it was one he either didn't or couldn't deal with in that moment, that moment when everything continued to fall into place for him. He was doing everything he set out to do, everything that had perhaps been asked of him by a person unknown, who was never found. It was time to get into the nearby rental car he'd secreted away and start the drive back to execute the final trip of the day, the one at noon. And then, who knows what would happen.

I wasn't thinking rationally enough to play dead. I managed to roll over. The rain felt like it was coming down a little harder. I saw Survinski, his back to me, standing very close to the cliff, about twenty yards away. I heard just the occasional tapping of the rain on the pavement. Somehow I got onto my feet. In that moment shooting pains went through my entire left side, from waist to temple, but then they stopped very suddenly. I staggered forward. After three or four steps, I felt whole, virtually undamaged, likely because of shock. I started to run. Stanley

Survinski turned around. He had absolutely no reaction to my shambling approach. My left eye went dark again as more blood flowed into it. I opened my mouth and began to holler hoarsely and wordlessly in short bursts, like a waterlogged machine gun.

I put my arms up and pushed Survinski backward. He flew outward over the edge of the precipice. I very nearly tumbled after him. Instead of watching him descend my eyes went immediately to the white sky above. I craned my head and sucked in a great gulp of air, sinking to my knees. No scream rose from the valley. Aside from the one other survivor of the crash of the ten o'clock bus, a woman named Maureen Block who was still unconscious far, far below me, I was alone there. Eventually I rose, and began to run again.

From the transcript of the meeting of the Silversmith Town Council, November 10, 1998:

ABRAHAM TOLCHIN: 'Two miles away from this building, the county is starting construction on a pedestrian trail that will bring hundreds of people every week directly past the spot in the New England Central Railroad's freight yard on Barco Street where a girl named Tanisha Draper has created an organic art installation that is drawing more and more attention to this town that I grew up in and still love. Her use of some abandoned rail cars as a home for her elaborate designs has now been featured in two regional magazines, and it's looking more and more like no one will be considering her efforts to be a temporary thing.

'So what I want to ask the council tonight is why we can't think of Silversmith as the place where *this* has happened instead of giving ownership of its history to Stanley Survinski. Why can't we consider Silversmith to be Tanisha Draper's town instead? What happened two years ago falls a little further behind us every day, and it can't ever get any closer. Meanwhile, her work is seen every day, right now, by the people who live here, and right now it's starting to be seen every day by people who *don't* live here. I want to ask, why are we willing to have one dark event define us and not something made of light?

'I ask this as a survivor who has many long years of recovery ahead. That recovery is going to take place right here no matter if we rename Silversmith or not. I think it would be a better place to start over if we fought back against August 3rd instead of letting it win. Changing our name, to me, is saying we lack the will to move on. It's like looking up from the bottom of a deep well and saying, *We're not strong enough to do it. We can't make it up there.*'

These days when you go past the spot on Barco Street where the old railyard used to be, you're confronted with a very different sight than twenty-one years ago when I made my little speech. It's a public park now, where the seven rail cars Tanisha Draper covered with her art between 1996 and 2004 are arranged in a loose circle among a gathering of young trees. The park is visited by approximately ten thousand people per month in summertime, and the garden has its own social media page along with being profiled on everything from the Travel Channel to an Oscar-nominated short documentary. Tanisha herself, now thirty-two years old, still lives with her mother and father a half mile south and has completed the fourth grade. She goes to the park almost every Saturday and offers a big smile to all who want to snap her picture, or pose with her for a selfie before grabbing a snow cone from a stand erected nearby. She has

met artists like Damien Hirst and Yayoi Kusama. At some point she lost interest in drawing and painting and became an absolute fiend for jigsaw puzzles, the more pieces the better.

The rail cars aren't going anywhere. They will exist for all time in the town of Silversmith, New Hampshire, named hundreds of years ago by British settlers. Even in the middle of the night when terrifying dreams threaten to tear me apart and everything is dark and horribly silent, Stockpaper carries on in Railyard Park, building up the energy in his big round body by eating puffy pancakes, then kicking away tall ocean waves so we do not find ourselves drowning beneath them.

DETECTIVE MAURA: These three racks, here, here and here, are all the evidence that was collected from Mr. Survinski's house. It wasn't very enlightening, I can tell you that. But we did find *this...* we were sure he drew this himself. You can see that all he did was draw in the margins of a magazine and then tear it out. This woman in black holding a plate with a piece of cake on it. It's kind of an eerie image. This is the only other reference to this mystery woman who he alleged to Mr. Garcia had offered him a job. You see how well detailed and realistic it is; he had an unusual talent for drawing. But then for some reason the skill totally breaks down when he did the eyes. They're drawn so strangely, so out of proportion... it just gave us more indication that this was someone from his imagination, and had never been real at all.

Q&A With a Vampire Killer

Going to Alexandria University back in the day and living off campus sucked pretty horrifically. There wasn't even a good Seven Eleven in town, and the bus lines stopped running at nine, so if you didn't have your uncle's old Ford Fiesta to cruise around in, you were walking everywhere. In my junior year I had to share an apartment on Walpole Road with a pair of perpetually stoned twin brothers who, from what I heard, wound up in a murder-suicide thing years later, like the ending of *Dead Ringers*, that kind of craziness. Anyway, one night I was poor and desperately wanting to be around normal people, so I took a drive past DeFago Hall over on Marchdale Street to see what their 8:00 Tuesday presentation might be.

DeFago Hall isn't around anymore, but it was a morose building where the university would try to hold local events the townspeople might be into: book signings, art films, lectures and so forth. Six old people clinging to the remnants of their college days would show up and applaud politely for whatever was given to them. That night in 2018, a single sheet of paper was taped to the entrance, bearing four lines of typing in Courier font. I rolled down my window and leaned way out to try to read them. They said this:

TONIGHT, JANUARY 28, 8 PM

Q&A WITH VAMPIRE KILLER HESTER SHELL
OPEN TO THE PUBLIC
FREE COFFEE

Well, I thought, it was better than having to try to watch *L'Avventura* or listen to someone yak about economies of scale, so I parked in the legendarily spooky parking garage around the corner, where you had to take a winding path up to the fourth floor of an abandoned warehouse to leave your car, then get into an elevator that fit only two people at a time down to the exit. One of my aforementioned terrible roommates referred to it as the Deathavator.

Once inside DeFago Hall, whose lobby was deserted as usual, I walked down a dim hallway and into an auditorium that theoretically would have sat about one hundred fifty, but had probably never been more than half full. That night it was me and eleven other people from town, bunched up kind of near the front. I sipped on my free lukewarm coffee and idly stirred my dry creamer into it.

Out came one of Alexandria's endless parade of twenty-two-year-old graduate assistants to take a seat on a wooden stool. Behind her came a taller, older woman with gray streaks in her long black hair, wearing a simple blouse and slacks combination. She sat a few feet away, on stool #2. She was introduced as Hester Shell, a vampire killer for twenty-four years, now retired and living in Wales. There was light applause.

Ms. Shell politely offered us all a brief and forgettable biographical sketch and then the proceedings were quickly turned over to the Q&A. Hands were raised all around me and I kicked back and hoped I might hear something I hadn't heard before; my own knowledge of the world of vampire hunters was pretty limited. What can I tell you, I was an engineering major and a psychology minor, and my grades were hanging on by a thread back then, so between that and chasing girls, all I really knew was that I went to college in an area where there were occasional anecdotal stories about sightings of fanged creatures, but it just seemed like worrying about getting struck by lightning.

Hester Shell had some pretty interesting stories to tell. She had first become a vampire killer when she and her then-boyfriend had been attacked in Chad while they were working for the Peace Corps. A cab driver had taken them well out of their way on a trip to meet a friend, and they'd demanded to be let off on a remote road, hoping to be able to navigate from there, but they'd only gotten more and more lost, and had decided to spend the night in an abandoned bus sitting in a field. Around four in the morning, another young couple had approached, holding hands. This was *their* sleeping place, they explained, but Hester and her boyfriend were welcome to stay.

Hester had a strange feeling about them and never fully fell asleep because of it. What was it about them that made her so worried? someone asked from the audience. Shell said it was their eye contact with each other in the moments just before dawn, staring at each other intently as they lay across the aisle from one another, as if they were trying to convey a sense of urgency without speech.

When the attack came, her grogginess slowed her just enough to make the result deadly. Her boyfriend hadn't made it out alive, but she'd found it in herself somehow to strike back with

more force and cunning than she realized she'd had in her. A mix of grief and anger had set her upon the path to becoming a vampire killer.

Everyone was most interested that night in hearing of her encounter with Frederick Knorr. Even I'd heard of *him*. He'd been pursued across the world since the mid-nineteenth century. At one point it was said that the lineage of every vampire in Australia could be traced back to him somehow, though most scholars agreed that was exaggeration.

Like a lot of hunters, Shell had spent time studying him, attempting to track him and ultimately failing. In 1994 she became aware of chatter that pinpointed Knorr as being somewhere in America, and specifically, the western states. Eight months later she believed he was, for unknown reasons, living in the Yosemite area. In June of 1995, she set out alone on foot on the John Muir trail outside Mammoth Lakes to work intensely on piecing together what information she had, camping out under the stars each night. On June 18, she was walking at night when she spotted a campfire up ahead, not an unusual sight. A lone man was sitting before it, reading poetry. He greeted Shell and despite the fact that he was partially disguised, she knew this man she was talking to, who never offered his name, was Frederick Knorr. They passed a pleasant twenty minutes talking about the area.

All the while, Shell was calculating how to kill him. But she knew she was unprepared. She eventually moved on, frightened of being followed, but at the same time, desperate to keep Knorr in range. By dawn, no trace of his campfire remained and he was gone.

She was never able to recover the scent, though she did nothing else but hunt him for the next year. Finally returning to England, defeated, she became depressed and began to drink, knowing she had missed the one chance she would likely ever have to kill the king of vampires. At DeFago Hall that night, she described herself as being close to suicide over her failure for almost five years. Every profession has dreamers, she told the tiny audience that night, and every dreamer has one dream. To kill Frederick Knorr was hers, and it was gone.

She told us more over the course of the hour, describing by request some of her most dangerous kills and techniques for making them happen. She'd put an end to fourteen vampires in all, just fourteen. She talked about what she'd given up, and her compulsions. She discussed the day she retired, after having her scalp half torn off in an attack by two teenaged vampires outside a soccer stadium in Spain.

I felt the need to ask a question of my own. It only seemed polite, since everyone else seemed to have taken a turn. So I asked what she had learned over the years about the *psychology* of vampires. Her answer was very interesting indeed.

The vampire's mind, she told us, was so different from our own, it was difficult to describe. What's that phrase—that the typical human being lives a life of quiet desperation. She thought that was true, but she would almost amend that to read that most live a life of *loud* desperation. We woke up in the morning and we assaulted ourselves with traffic and the news, and the internet and smartphones, and the screaming matches that are a part of all of them. The vampire, on the other hand, existed in a world separate from all of that. To a vampire, the notion that current events or politics or social media were worth an instant of attention was vaguely absurd. They had quieted their lives to an incredible extent. There was no controversy in their nights. They didn't discuss what was "going on." They knew about literature and history and music, and they knew about beauty. They could talk for hours about it if they wished to. Their

world moved slowly and deliberately, and the only real conflict they knew was the conflict between the hunter and the hunted.

It was pure and perfect. It was cerebral and calm. It was existence stripped to what was most pleasing, and it left out everything that would corrupt it.

After the Q & A, I stepped across the street to pick up a prescription, then started to walk back to the parking garage. The streets were deserted. As I crossed Oleron Street, I saw to my surprise that Hester Shell was walking down it, wrapped in a black coat. We were headed in the same direction and made awkward eye contact, and so I was sort of obliged to join her path, although I detected a glimmer of uneasiness on her part, and why not? Half her life she'd been watching the shadows, and what had come out of them had sometimes been terrifying.

I told her I'd really been impressed by her answers, and had learned a little something that night. She smiled politely, said she was glad. As we moved down the sidewalk, we chatted a bit about the university, and her somewhat itinerant life speaking to young people about her past—its educational value for them, its therapeutic value for her. I asked her if I knew how strangely positive she'd sounded about the vampire's way of life, and she did not laugh it off as I expected her to. She just nodded slowly, serenely.

In that moment I thought I perceived her whole troubled history, and she looked old, so old, this woman who had killed fourteen vampires even as she'd worked to document their culture and behaviors for almost no pay. It was hard to believe this was the same woman who'd once had a mountainside conversation with Frederick Knorr, calculating in every moment of it how to destroy him.

We got to the parking garage soon enough. To get to the Deathavator, we had to walk down a hallway with a low, bowed ceiling with exposed bulbs and the occasional dripping pipe. It all just lent to the legend. We became quiet, and I sensed our conversation was over. As we approached the elevator I was about to make a little comment about it, how I was glad she was there to get in with me because sometimes I was a little afraid to get into that freakishly cramped box alone. But before I could, we were standing there after I had pressed the button to summon it, and she looked at me closely and said this: *If you had the chance, would you take that way of life?*

The elevator door opened, revealing its dusky and stained interior. And every cell inside me began to scream for me not to get in there with her. She stepped in and turned to me, holding the door open.

"What am I doing?" I chuckled. "I parked on the street outside the pharmacy tonight so I could get my prescription," and I held up the bag as if to prove it.

She wished me goodnight and the elevator door closed. Unseen, she went up, up to the top floor, where my car waited for me.

I retreated down the hallway and jogged across the street to Macready's Pub, where after a tall bottle of Heineken I called for an Uber to take me home. Not until the next morning did I retrieve

my car, walking to the garage under a sunny sky. I didn't take the Deathavator up, and I even found myself peering my back seat before I got in my car and drove away.

So that was the night I believed it was just possible that I encountered a former vampire hunter who may have been turned at some point in her later years. I never quite learned enough about psychology, human or otherwise, to understand why she would have lived a lie like that... except that maybe lots of nighttime lectures in small college towns would bring someone into contact with a lot of young people, many of whom would likely have to walk back home in the dark, even if it was just to their dorms. And then...

But now, today, nineteen years after that night, I feel sad and guilty for thinking that. Because now I know I was wrong. I read an obituary recently in the *New York Times*, of a woman named Hester Shell, who had just been killed in Galway, Ireland.

She had recently moved to a small apartment in a retirement complex. There had been a fierce struggle. Shell had managed to write the name of her assailant on her own shirt, in her own blood, before she died from the loss of it. That name was Frederick Knorr. According to some old colleagues, in her twilight years she had again begun to doggedly research his whereabouts, and it seems that he did not wait for a chance encounter to settle the issue. He found her, and he put an end to her.

I admire Hester Shell, really. She did not fail, because she never gave up on her dream, as strange as it was. I can't say the same for myself. My two pieces of paper from Alexandria University bought me a quiet career and a quiet house and eventually a family that kept me locked into that quiet career and that quiet house. I wanted more... but I thought the risks were too great.

Today, I sit on the eleventh floor of the Bechtel Building downtown, waiting for my two o'clock status meeting, and thinking of how awful it must have been for her in that moment when I offered such a feeble lie to stay out of that elevator. After all her bravery, all she'd endured, all the death she had seen... to be perceived as the very kind of monster she'd spent her life protecting us from, then riding up alone and walking across the dank parking garage and returning to her hotel alone...

So this story is not just a bit of *curiosa*, but my contrite way of honoring the indomitable yearnings of the true hunter, to which I in my blindness paid insult, and then lived so meekly to tell about.

The Copper Cup

My name is Mark Cauliff. During a move recently, I found an old recording of my appearance on a radio show out of Dallas. I'd never actually listened to it before, this true story I told over the phone to an anonymous audience a decade ago. In listening, I realized that I had left something out of the story—and that was how I came to think of its main character once again after years of

blacking him out entirely from my mind. Shortly before the main events of the story began to unfold, I'd been walking alone in the woods near the house you'll soon hear described.

Hearing a strange animal cry somewhere nearby, I turned and looked around at the trees and was alarmed to see someone watching me. My very first thought, rising up from the depths of distant memory, was: It's him. It's Uncle Gray. A name that had not occurred to me in a very long time. But what had happened was that a curious branch formation, blending with some unusual natural markings on a poplar tree, had for a split second fooled me into thinking I was looking at a human body and a cruel human face. So strange, the unexpected cues that can bring memories back. I offer this recording now because God help me, it does feel like the more the whole story is known by all, the more protected I am against the possible return of Uncle Gray.

You're listening to Strange Chimes. This is Vanessa Spall. Tonight I'm speaking with Mark Cauliff, who, twelve years ago, had an encounter he'll never forget. Mark, welcome.

Thank you.

Where in your mind does this story begin?

Well, in summer of 1997, my father became very ill; he was in his early eighties and very suddenly everything just seemed to go wrong. He was confined to the hospital for the duration of his life. The doctors were never quite sure exactly what was happening, and nothing they tried seemed to work to regulate his heart. To me, the story began the night the lead doctor called me and my brother in and told us that a tipping point seemed to have been reached where there was only a fifty-fifty chance that my father would recover. His organs had begun to show signs of ultimate failure.

Right, right. And where were you living at the time?

This was in Athens, Georgia.

You were how old then?

Twenty-eight.

And your brother was older, is that right?

Yeah, he was thirty-one at the time. He was shuttling back and forth between the hospital there and his house seventy miles away in Atlanta.

The doctor told us it was time to maybe inform the relatives about what the prognosis was, so my brother made a couple of calls, and I went back to my father's house, where I had been living again for about four years, taking care of him, taking care of the house and so forth; and driving back there that night from the hospital, something happened. I was in a tunnel where there was some repaving being done, so they had flagmen moving traffic though. I was stopped. I very suddenly felt something in the car with me, someone in the car with me, I should say—that

sense of human presence, it was so strong that I turned and looked in the back seat and even wondered about the trunk. The air felt thick with it, this presence, and then it was gone.

I stopped for gas later at a Sunoco station that was closed for the night, but the pumps were lit up for self-service. It was almost twelve by then. And when I was standing there on the tarmac beside the road, the dark road, I felt it again. I felt like someone was near. Behind me. But when I turned, no. Ten seconds later I knew it was just me out there. I had this random thought, that my father was starting the process of passing from this world. Ridiculous thought.

Did you believe in ghosts?

No, not since I was very small.

The next night, we did have a few relatives come in to visit my father, the ones who were close enough, and I talked to my great aunt, a very odd old woman who talked a lot, she liked to talk about family history. Aunt Anne. There was a dinner I don't remember much about, but I know I and my brother stayed out very late, talking in a bar. He was explaining to me the financial situation we were in with the house.

Yes, explain for our listeners what the story was with the house.

It was the house I'd grown up in with my brother and my mother and my father, near the town's west side, a very big, very old house, and we had moved north when my mother died when Bill and I were about ten, and then it had eventually been re-purchased. Bill and Dad intended to renovate it a bit and start giving tours there because of some events of historical interest that had come to light in the interim. And that's what I had wound up doing part-time. I gave the tours and my brother handled the finances, so now he was telling me that we needed to double the number of tours I gave during the week to have a fighting chance to bring more money in, pay the taxes and so forth. He told me our father's debts were very likely going to completely wipe out any inheritance we might be in for. Very tight situation.

We were in that bar really late, and I decided it was safe to ask him a question I'd been wondering about in the back of my mind for many years. Since my mother was long gone and it looked like Dad was very close to death, I asked him what the story was with our Uncle Gray. I'd been hoping Aunt Anne might mention him but once again, she never did. No one ever did. He was someone who was never referred to in my childhood, which I found a little odd back then, and over the years the silence was so deafening I figured that it wasn't really welcome for me to bring him up. So I asked my brother that night in the bar: What was the deal with this man? It seemed safe now to bring it up, we were adults.

And what did he say?

He looked at me and he said, "Who the hell is Uncle Gray?" And we had this odd back and forth where I thought he was joking, but it became obvious he had no idea who I was talking about. So I explained that I knew an Uncle Gray, someone who had spent some time with me when I was very young, he'd been to the house, I knew that was his name. But my brother said No, no, you must be confusing him with a neighbor, because I never knew him. And that aggravated me, let me tell you; I had some specific memories of this man, four or five specific memories, and now my brother was saying I was mixed up. So I dropped it, but that, combined with what had happened the night before and the grief over what was happening to my father, it all made my mind get stuck on this mystery. I had too much time during my days to let it go.

Your brother had absolutely no memories of this man.

None.

He had to go back and tend to some real estate dealings he had going on in Alpharetta, so in the two days before he returned, I sat down with a spiral notebook and began to write down all my memories of Uncle Gray.

That seems like an extraordinary step.

I know. I was intent on clearing up my own mind about this issue. I've had some depression, some very hard times in the past, and I had learned it was best and safest for me to confront any situation which made me feel like my mind was not whole. It was a proactive way of putting myself back together in the face of a threat to my sanity. My brother had a way of doing this to me in the past, of making me feel uneasy about my own mind.

And what was the result of your brainstorming?

I wrote out my list of experiences with Uncle Gray, there were four of them total. All of them took place at the house, my father's house, where I grew up with my brother. It had usually within the house or in the back yard.

He was a very tall man who had an aroma of tobacco about him, and he would warn me that smoking was a very bad thing. I remember him being a little funny in a corny way, in a way that older people try to entertain very young kids. He seemed very old to me, he had a beard. But there wasn't much more, and when my brother came back to town and we spent another couple of hours at the hospital, watching my father's body slowly decline, he and I went to a diner afterward and went over some tax stuff and I brought out my list. I said, Bill, I have these notes I made about Uncle Gray.

And he had a very troubling, to me, insight. He listened to it all and he said, Mark, look at the common thread in these experiences. No one else was around when you and this "Uncle Gray" were together, not Mom, not Dad, and you never went beyond the property. You're unclear as to what sort of activities you did with him. This man seemed to be just *there*, and, he pointed out, there was no memory of physical contact. He never hugged me, he never took me out in a car, and so forth. Even in a memory of Uncle Gray being there one Thanksgiving, he didn't seem to interact with anyone, just sat at the end of the table, keeping to himself. Bill told me that there was no one named Gray in the family, and never had been, which was true, so his conclusion was still that this was a neighbor, a casual family friend who referred to himself as my uncle—or I inferred that title. But it was also possible, he believed, that none of it was real.

And what was so frustrating was that of course every point he made was valid. But I did have one recollection of a physical exchange. The last time I remember being in the same room as this person, he gave me something, he gave me a toy, a shiny toy, or some object, and upon giving it to me he'd rolled up his shirt sleeve and showed me that his arm, left or right, I forget which, was discolored, it was much darker than the rest of his skin. That wasn't something I'd seen before.

That act was related somehow to the giving of the object. I remember this happening at the same time, and that I hadn't understood why he would give this thing to me—I felt a little afraid even. I hadn't remembered what the toy was, or what I did with it after that, but I do remember taking it from him, or he set it down and I took it for myself. I had no more memories of him beyond that.

So Mark, knowing what we know as adults about the fragility of memory, was it difficult to accept that there might have been no Uncle Gray?

It *was* difficult for me, because while I couldn't remember the specifics of conversations or what he and I did, I remember the *time* and the sense that I was being watched out for by someone who was acting like a guardian. Not a neighbor, and not an imaginary friend.

What happened then at the house? This would be a good time to really fill us in on the nature of that place; we didn't quite touch on that before.

Yes, the house. Ah, Bill had always been very business-savvy; he'd been interested in getting the property back since he thought my father had botched the sale years before, and he'd found out that the house was once lived in by a man named Donald Ian Cogland, who had committed the very famous Orchard Murders in 1848. Our house was where he'd killed eight people and buried their bodies in the little apple orchard at the low edge of our property. I should say they were not especially famous until the movie was made about it. One day 20th Century Fox called us—this was maybe eighteen months after Bill had bought the house back—and they wanted to shoot part of the movie there. We'd never even heard of these murders, and the movie became a tremendous success, and one day Bill sat me down and said Look, Dad and I have had some investments that didn't pan out. I think it's time to recognize the obvious profit potential of giving tours of the house instead of flipping it.

Can you tell us a little bit about the Orchard Murders themselves, and what it was like to live in that house?

It was one of those things that you think is going to be awful, but like anything else, you get so used to the day-to-day that it truly rolls off your back after a while. Cogland had killed a group of Catholic missionaries that he'd lured in via responding to a notice in a Louisiana church bulletin. There was an upstairs bedroom which our family had never actually used as a bedroom. Through my entire childhood it was an abandoned sewing room, and that was where the murders had happened for the most part, there and in the guest bedroom, which coincidentally was also just barely used when I was a kid.

But it was the orchard that was the real draw.

Yeah, we got a call one day and the studio people wanted to arrange to shoot for a few days there. And you can see why. There's that famous photo of it, with those strangely gnarled trees. Even as kids we didn't like to go down there. It felt like an unpleasant spot, a haunted spot almost. I couldn't even watch when they filmed down there, I thought that was a ghastly thing, so many people down there among those trees re-creating terrible crimes. I couldn't watch, but there I was just a year later taking people down there on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, telling them the story, letting them touch those trees, especially the tall one from the movie poster. Taking them through the house, taking their money...

Right. And how did the tours tie in to what happened next?

This was maybe six days after I was talking to my brother about Uncle Gray. I was leading a tour, it was a Sunday afternoon, maybe five people down by the apple orchard. There was this one man on the tour who stuck out for two reasons. One was that he was very short, barely over five feet tall, and he had a very odd tic which I never knew the origin of. Every twenty or thirty seconds he would quickly slap himself near the left shoulder blade, as if he were swatting a fly. Over and over again. He asked a lot of questions and he seemed to already have a lot of information about the house itself to the point where it was a little disconcerting. He knew a lot about the acreage itself, the area ... and he was kind of aggressive with his questions, uncomfortably so, always asking these things with a kind of sinister grin, as if he were testing me.

When the tour was over, he came up to me and introduced himself. His name was Sam Moats, and he remembered me from high school. But I didn't remember him at all. He asked me how much I knew about the history of the house *after* the Orchard Murders. The answer to that was basically nothing. He said he worked for Emory University in the antiquities library and he had access to a certain archive which I would likely find very interesting. A great deal had been kept from the area, and a certain specific passage in one diary from the very late nineteenth century made, in his mind, a strong connection to the house.

So you followed up.

I did, but it took a little while. My father had another episode where he seemed to get a little better, only to suddenly get worse again. The doctors would stabilize him but then suddenly there would be a worsening of the condition, so I and my brother were at the hospital a lot, and then, on August 8, he was finally taken off life support, and given about seventy-two hours to live.

You were staying in the house all that time, correct?

Yeah, I still was there.

What did Sam Moats show you?

He brought over a bunch of documents in a shoebox. They were very old diaries, from the turn of the century, most of them falling apart. He showed me the passage he was talking about in one, and in it, a servant had described very much in detail the apple orchard, which even back then apparently didn't actually produce many apples. But from that you could extrapolate that this woman lived in servant's quarters on the property, which had been demolished long before we came along. Four of the diaries were hers, and two belonged to another servant who worked and lived in a house down the road. They were a pretty interesting depiction of everyday life in the years 1895 to about 1901.

But you didn't read them all there with Sam.

No, he let me borrow them. I read them all that night.

So what did you learn?

Between what the two servants wrote—and they knew each other back then—there was mention of certain townspeople again and again, the ones they dealt with, three of which they mentioned more than anyone else: a grocer; the town Catholic priest, who was a very colorful character, a cat lover; and a man named Duncan Blay.

He was the most interesting person both these women knew. They wrote of him very fondly. He was a handyman, a would-be carpenter. He was locally famous for making chocolate brittle and riding around town on a horse-drawn carriage on Sundays after church and passing it out to everyone he came across. Very proud of his chocolate brittle, he was. There was a photograph of him in the box among a few dozen others from that time tucked into one of the diaries at various intervals, and in it he's sitting on the carriage, but it was so faded his face was pretty much a blur. On the back someone had written *Duncan B.* and the date.

What made this man memorable in my reading—and Sam was aware of this too, he was sort of waiting for me to catch it—was that mentions of him went from things like, “Oh, we saw Duncan at church yesterday” or “Duncan came over to ask about fixing the well” to nothing for a while, and then to something very different. The woman who had left behind four diaries that we knew of, Charlotte Price, wrote at one point that the man's name was never to be spoken again in the household. This command came from the house's owners. The man was a doctor, his wife was a nature writer. So there was that. The other servant who had left her own journals wrote of a day when she'd talked to that town priest down by the apple orchard; it's referred to specifically again, for the second time. He had come by to pick up a cake and she was talking to him about God and how it could be—she wrote this—how it could be that someone beloved like Duncan Blay could be found out to have caused such evil. *Have caused such evil*, her exact words. And then no mention of him ever again in the diaries.

Were you able to find out more about what she was referring to?

Yeah, once Sam trusted that I'd gone through the diaries, he read a newspaper article from that period to me over the phone. On a day in summer, Duncan Blay had been found at about four a.m. in the middle of West Broad Street, clutching a cup in one hand. He was dead from arsenic poisoning. It appeared he'd been trying to reach our house, probably for medical treatment. Remember, a doctor lived there at the time, but Blay had never made it. When they entered the place where he'd been living, which was really not much more than a tarpaper shack apparently, they found his wife, who immediately confessed to poisoning him in the middle of the night when he asked her to bring him some water. He'd woken up from having a nightmare. They asked her why she did it, and she told them about four missing children, all from Jackson County, the next county over from us.

What did Sam's interest seem to be in all of this?

I originally thought he was just excited at the discovery and wanted to share it because it would be of interest to the tour groups. Here now we had *two* possibly evil people connected to the house. But the last thing on my mind with all that was going on was this story of what happened with some carpenter around the turn of the century. To me at that moment it was just a compelling distraction, not anything to concern myself with. That would change.

I really didn't want to have too much more to do with Sam himself. He made a comment at one point about how it was good to see that I was healthy and well these days, because he said there

had been talk about me back in high school about how maybe I wasn't going to make it, just not live very long.

Why would he say that?

I did miss about a year total. I had been diagnosed with undifferentiated schizophrenia, so I got that tag of course, that tag of being the kid with the mental problems.

Do you deal with schizophrenia to this day?

I do, but even in the period of my life when this all happened, everything was very stable. But it led me to doubt myself, I had to make written lists of what I knew for certain and what I *couldn't* know for certain.

What was on the first list?

I knew a man had visited me when I was a kid, talked to me, who had referred to himself as Uncle Gray, and he'd given me an object, a toy at one point, and showed me his arm, his damaged arm, as if to connect it to the gift somehow. And also on that list was that I had felt something in the car in that tunnel which was not my imagination. Beyond that, all details were in doubt. I couldn't be one hundred percent sure of the things that had been said to me, for example.

I know that we create narratives in our minds to try to make sense of the world, and we rewrite memories that don't suit us or that are too difficult. We experience sensory things that we translate into the domain of our other senses, so a sound will become a sight over the years, or feelings will fool us into thinking we remember real words that stand in for them. I know we live in this maze of our own recollections, with all these dead ends and false exits. I know it.

What was the next thing that happened?

My father's death.

That night, after we'd visited and let him go, I went back to the house from the hospital. I was building a fire in the living room, it was getting on really late, and I felt the presence again. It was like someone had plugged the air in the room into a light socket, that's how I think of it. That energy had come back, and I knew that the person I was sensing was in a very specific corner of the room, near a bookshelf.

I sat there and I waited, and after about a minute, that sense of presence moved. Suddenly it was well behind me, on the other side of the room. I turned around and of course, there was nothing.

There was another thirty seconds of that feeling, and then it went away. And I felt the need to call out, so I did. I said, "Who's there?" No answer, obviously. I really was alone.

Did you leave the house, or...

I did, I wanted to get out of there, so I went for what I thought was going to be a short drive to a bar. I didn't even want to be in the car for very long should there be a repeat of what happened in the tunnel. But at the bar, I started thinking about where a lot of my own childhood

possessions were—in a storage unit in Bishop, and now I wanted to see them because I thought there might be a slight, an ever so slight chance that whatever Uncle Gray had given me, it might be there.

I had never even seen this stuff since I was a child, though I passed the storage facility pretty often. I didn't have a key or anything, so I went in there and gave my identification and it turns out I was listed on the account, so I just had to pay a few dollars for a new key. In I went, to the second floor of this dingy old warehouse at about one in the morning. These places were not quite as nice as they are today, there was barely even any light. I was looking at all these cardboard boxes and moving them around and going through them unsuccessfully, and at one point I opened an oversized box of Matchbox cars. Other old things had been crammed in there as well, and I saw something that made me catch my breath.

It was a small cup made of copper, very thin, no handle, like it had been handmade. And I felt so scared just then, because I knew right away this was the thing that Uncle Gray had given me. It was not a toy, it was this cup. I just didn't know why. I was afraid to touch it at first. I wanted someone to be there with me, but I had to, I had to take it. If there had been any doubt about what it was, it ended when I turned the cup over and saw five numbers etched by hand onto the bottom. I remembered those numbers very vividly, almost like a serial number or something.

My entire childhood came back. Uncle Gray and I had both touched this object, and I'd kept it.

A very odd thing to give to you, of all things.

Yeah.

Did you take it back with you?

Yes. I psyched myself up to go back to the house, and I put the cup into another box so it would be out of sight, and I crawled into bed, it was very late.

The phone woke me up at about seven, and my brother and I were being asked to approve of an autopsy on my father. His doctor, Edward Montanez, had requested one, based on some unusual patterns my father had shown in his final days. The reasoning was that the rate of his multiple organ failure brought up the concern that there might have been an unnatural element to his demise. My brother did not want this to happen. He was adamant about it. My father had been eighty-two, so there was no cause to believe there was a public health risk, and it would delay the funeral. But it didn't matter, because the coroner's office ordered it anyway.

Why did they do that?

Dr. Montanez had petitioned for it. He wanted a toxicologist to come in and help examine the body, he said there were one or two signs consistent with arsenic poisoning. So there was no choice in the end, it was going to happen.

What was your reaction when you heard that?

Disbelief. It wasn't like a father had any enemies. We were both a little in shock. So we just waited.

What was your thinking in regards to the cup? Was there a plan in your mind to do something with it?

I took it to Sam. I felt uneasy around him but there was something about him which led me to believe he would listen to my story in a more accepting way, and what I really wanted was someone to accept my account. But also, something bothered me about the cup, because it seemed so antiquated and odd. Sam claimed to be an expert in a lot of things, and it was a little strange how as soon as I told him the whole story about Uncle Gray, and I mentioned how old this cup seemed, suddenly it turns out he had experience as an appraiser of antiques and part of his work at the college was archiving objects. It could have well been true, but he was someone who conveyed the sense that the truth wasn't as important to him as making you *believe* something was true, if that makes sense.

It does.

He turns the cup over and over in his hands, and he plinks it with his finger, and he points out the irregularities, and he says "Well, this cup is at least a hundred years old." He had no explanation for the numbers on the bottom. That confused both of us.

What were the numbers?

6 12 97. Sam's guess was that the etching was the date someone had made it, which made sense at the time.

It was two days after that that the police served my brother with a search warrant. That was based on the word of a couple of nurses who told Doctor Montanez about the patterns of the visits he'd made to my father alone, and how they coincided with certain developments in my father's illness. And the coroner's report, which found a very high amount of arsenic in my father's blood.

They arrested Bill not long after that. Total devastation.

I decided to leave the house for a while. I checked into the cheapest motel I could find. I cancelled all tours. I went into hiding really. But Sam found me. To this day I'm not sure how he did it, and he called me with great urgency. He wanted to meet, so I agreed to go to this dive bar nearby, where he was waiting in a dim corner booth. He'd heard about what had happened but he wanted to talk about the cup and a thought he'd been having. He'd been thinking about the name Duncan Blay, and the way it sounded so much like "Uncle Gray." He suggested that back then, my child's mind may have somehow absorbed the names into each other. He believed the man who had visited me at the age of five or so was Duncan Blay. Or to be more accurate, his ghost.

What was your reaction?

I was stony. I let him talk, in the same way you'll let a friend who claims they've had an experience with a poltergeist or a psychic vision talk. I was starting to see how much of a fringe system of beliefs this person had, and how essentially unhinged he was. He said when he'd come to the house to go on the tour, he'd sensed it might be a place of unresolved business. That was how he phrased it. Unresolved business. But not from the Orchard Murders, because the victims

and the perpetrator involved in that episode had nothing more to tell us, there was no more story there. But maybe this was not true with the man who had come to me when I was a child.

Who had the cup at this time?

I did. But I had left it at the house, I didn't want it with me. He'd asked me to bring it with me that night, but I didn't. What he was suggesting next was some kind of séance, but he was very careful to not call it that. He said No no, that's not reality, that's something from books and movies. He talked about how in reality, it was much more difficult to establish a connection to the spirit world. It took more discipline and creativity and sacrifice, I think he said. And you know, he did that tic again where he lightly slapped his left shoulder blade, every thirty seconds or so. Whatever he wanted to do, whether he wanted to call it a séance or not, he didn't want to describe just what he meant, but he said he would need the cup and he wanted my approval before moving on with this. And I couldn't agree to that.

So that's where I left it. I got in my car and I drove away. My brother had just been released on bond but he was in terrible shape, absolutely baffled about why he would be suspected of killing his own father. My mind was unraveling, I could not entertain Sam and his insane notions about ghosts. I couldn't. That would have led me down into darkness.

I finally decided to go back to the house a couple of nights later. There was still a lot of my father's that I had to pack up and donate, it had to be done, and my brother was in no shape to do it.

I was confused at first though, because I got the feeling going through the house that some drawers had been rearranged, or objects moved. I couldn't say that about any one thing, but the feeling was there. It all just felt off. And I found myself unable to not seek out the cup again. Being in the same house with it felt odd to me, it wasn't welcome.

So I went into the kitchen. I had put it up behind some glasses and inside a little box. That normalized it somehow. But it wasn't there, it was gone. Once I saw that, the fact that other objects seemed to have been moved told me someone had been in here. I called my brother. He said no, he hadn't been back to the house. He was drunk on the phone, I remember.

And eventually I saw that the knob on the back door, which led into the kitchen, had been almost completely pried loose. Someone had broken in and taken the cup, but nothing else was missing. Not one thing.

Did you make the immediate connection in your mind to Sam?

Yes. I couldn't reach him on the phone, so I drove to his house, at about ten o'clock that night. He lived in a little bungalow-style house, and I could see from the curb that something had happened. The front door was literally on its face on the steps, as if it had been blown off the hinges. The way in was wide open. Sam lived on a quiet street but there were neighbors, and I suppose they would have had to have seen this and maybe just not known what to make of it. I heard some faint noise from inside, a consistent noise like a TV had been left on static. It was dark in there but I decided to go in.

What did you see?

Nothing in the living room, but I could hear that white noise much louder, so I decided to trace it. That took me toward the basement. When I opened that door, the noise was really, really loud. I went down these wooden stairs, there were no lights on down there, just a glow. I got down there and there was a TV set on a table, tuned to a dead channel. That was where the static noise was coming from, cranked up to the very limits of the TV's volume.

The next thing I noticed was a tremendous shape in the center of this unfinished basement with a cement floor, some kind of huge object that must have been ten feet long and five feet wide. It had heavy blankets all over it, obscuring it. Sheets too, whatever could be draped over it, and I'll never forget how that shape was silhouetted by the static on the TV screen, so these constant flashes of light were striking it, making it all look black. That has stuck with me almost as much as anything else.

Across the basement from this there was a cot, and someone was lying on it. It gave me another scare. It was a woman with long dark hair. She was lying on her side. Her eyes were closed. She had a blanket over her. I took one step in her direction and I heard someone speak. It was Sam. His voice was very hoarse. All he said was, "Don't touch her."

I looked in the direction of his voice and he was nearby, mostly in the dark, slumped deep down in an old upholstered chair. I saw that on the floor nearby were bottles of pills and bottles of liquor. And the cup was there too among them, my cup. The only other thing down there was a... how do I describe it, a very shallow, perfectly rectangular wooden box about five feet long with no cover, and someone had filled it with a black liquid substance, just enough to cover the bottom surface. I think I saw some thin streaks in that substance, which I think was paint, black paint or maybe dark red.

I asked Sam what had happened here. He seemed to have no energy in his body at all, barely enough to keep his eyes open. And when he spoke, it was so weak I had to lean in to hear him over the sound of the TV static. He said really just one thing. He said, "Look in the box. Look in the box."

Initially I followed his eyes when he said this, and I thought he meant the enormous thing in the middle of the room. It was a box of a kind. There was a door handle built into its side. So I pulled on it, and it slid open in on an empty dark chamber. Not quite empty though. It was, I would say, half-filled with water, and instantly I could smell salt water. I had read enough to think that what I was looking at was a sensory deprivation tank, designed to block out all light, create a perfectly controlled environment for someone to float in and enter a different realm of consciousness in the total dark. But then I thought, no, what Sam meant for me to look at was that long box on the floor nearby.

So I crouched down and got a better look at those streaks in the paint, if it was paint. The only thing I could make sense of, and it was very clear, was a date written there, as if a finger had written it.

It was 6 - 12 - 1997.

Did you make the connection to the cup right away?

Yes, I did. Right away I noticed that it was essentially the same number as was on the bottom of the cup, but with the number 19 in front of the 97. So that made it not, say, 1897, but a hundred

years later. Sam must have been looking right at my face and seen an understanding there, because he then said, "That's the date your brother first poisoned your father."

And June 12 would have been about two months before the night you went into that basement?

Yes.

What then?

I think I must have said something more to Sam, but either I wiped it out or it never happened. I remember going back up the steps, and going back toward the front door. I was very afraid. I drove back to my father's house.

I was standing in my bedroom, just standing there, I had my keys in my hand, for what felt like a long time, all these thoughts running through my head, and I heard the front door open downstairs. And then some creaking as someone came in. You could hear such a thing all though the house, it was so old. This person would have seen my car outside, so I couldn't close my door and let them do whatever they needed to do. I went downstairs. The longest walk of my life.

In the kitchen was my brother. He looked haggard, like he hadn't slept for days. He had come... he didn't really say why, he said there were some things he needed, that was all.

We were there in the kitchen, and he said, "Come here." I... I heard that, and I couldn't move. So he took a few steps toward me. He looked at the fingers on my left hand, and he said, "Did you cut yourself?" There was what looked like dried blood there, but I didn't feel anything. I didn't understand where it had come from. Bill said he had lots to do, so I should probably go to sleep and not mind him. It sounded to me somehow like an instruction, a direction. So I did excuse myself and left the kitchen, and went upstairs, and closed the door. And I locked it. And I spent an hour lying awake, listening to the sounds of him going from room to room downstairs, and upstairs too, until he left.

The blood on your fingers...

I didn't have a cut there, so I don't know where it came from, but...

You probably know what I'm thinking.

I think I do, and I don't know if I may have touched the substance in the box back in Sam's basement. My memories of that moment aren't strong enough. I *think* it was paint. I just can't tell you *how* I thought that. I really have no idea what was in there. I do know that the woman on the cot was not injured, or at least she showed no obvious signs of injury. She was sleeping. Sam was not noticeably injured, but he was very, very weak. I believe she was the one who had been inside that tank, only because her hair, that long hair, was in tangles, as if it had been wet very recently.

That date, June 12, 1997...

My brother was convicted of killing my father in summer of 1998. During the trial the prosecution very methodically connected the dates of my father's first entry to the hospital with his subsequent medical downturns to show that the first time he was subjected to the arsenic, which would have been at the house, was June 12, 1997.

The date etched onto the bottom of the cup you received as a child.

Yes.

Why would Bill have wanted to poison your father?

It was money. The more secret debt that Bill accumulated, the more he had to steal from my father. It was never my father's debt, it was Bill's own. And it became apparent that my father had been threatening to dissolve their legal partnership, which would have left Bill in a spot he must have feared he couldn't get out of.

Do you think that back then, you were being told when this thing would happen?

What would I have done with that date? What could it possibly mean to me as a child, or as an adult? I never would have contacted someone like Sam. Why would this person not have warned my father instead?

Do you think your father would have believed?

No. I don't.

It's said by some that ghosts show themselves physically only to the very young, because their minds haven't been conditioned yet to deny such things, and that ghosts can only communicate their messages to the extent that the recipients are open to hearing it. Do you believe that's true?

I think the reason could also be to mock us, that a ghost knows no one will believe a child. So in showing himself, Uncle Gray, or Duncan Blay, was very cynically playing with me. Getting some kind of sick pleasure out of giving me some kind of cryptic warning which he knew I'd never understand.

But that sense of presence you felt at the very beginning... is it possible that was maybe a way for him to establish himself in your mind, and get you thinking about him again, as if he were trying to call out and set this all in motion? And perhaps you were just a little too late?

Maybe.

Do you still have the cup?

No. I never contacted Sam again, and he never contacted me. Right after the night I went into the basement I moved my things to an apartment in town a few miles away. I moved to Boston a couple of years later.

As far as coming again to think of yourself as a believer in ghosts, did that happen?

It did happen. It happened when I was washing that dried blood off my hands. I believed in ghosts again.

There's one more part to the story, isn't there.

It's hard to... yes.

I went to see Bill in prison for the first time on Christmas Eve in 1998. I hadn't been able to bring myself to do it until then. The bank was about to take the house for debt, so I mustered up one last visit to the house just to see what the temporary caretaker had been doing with maintenance and so forth. One last visit before the lawyers took over completely. It was a ninety mile drive back to Athens from the prison.

I got back to the house at about one in the morning, and I found that I couldn't go in. I walked around it knowing that this was it, this was the last image of my childhood home that I would ever have. I went out back to the shed where Bill and I used to pretend it was a fortress and we were superheroes. I looked down toward the low edge of the property, the ravine where the apple orchard was. It had begun to snow just a little bit. It was very dark down there, but I saw there near the old apple trees, the figures of four children, small children. Looking up toward the house. Which made no sense. Why were they there? It was so late, and very cold.

And here came walking up someone else, a man. Here he came, methodically up the hill. Finally he got close enough where I could see his manner of dress, which was a little odd, a little out of date. And completely bare feet, impossible not to notice. He came up to me. He had a beard and very small eyes. I remember noticing that when I breathed, I could see my breath; it was actually tough to see through it, but I didn't see any coming out of *his* mouth.

He came within about five feet of me. He had his sleeves rolled up, and I could see that his left forearm was very discolored and mottled, which I know now can be a symptom of arsenic poisoning. And so I finally recognized him. He said, *I want my cup.*

I said, *I don't have it anymore.* He said it again: *I want my cup.* I told him, *You gave it to me. It's not yours.*

And he turned and walked back down the hill. Those children were gone. I lost sight of him down near the orchard. He walked through it and deeper into the dark, and then he wasn't there anymore.

transit

My name is Sidney Romine. I am on a boat. The boat is cruising slowly in the mid-afternoon sunlight, showing the two hundred or so people on board the quaint sights of Ellicott Bay and, in the far distance now, the Seattle waterfront. I have a light beer in my right hand and I'm sitting below deck, enclosed and out of the sun. Everyone—the tourists, the locals on board—seem to be enjoying themselves.

But I just saw something out the window to my left that has made me worry. I am afraid. There's something out there on the water, something others have already seen but aren't concerned about in the slightest. It's just me, I'm sure. But I've been conditioned by the past.

I seem to have developed a sense for imminent inexplicable catastrophe. I've never felt quite like this before. And I think to myself now, as I sit here not knowing what to do, that of course I should have known better than to get on a boat. I should have suspected that the end of my life would take place on a mechanism of transit, likely one I hadn't thought twice about.

Even at the age of four, you see, mechanical things that moved at great speed played a big part in my fears and my fascinations. When I lay in my bed at night in the big house I used to live in with my mom and dad, and looked across the dark bedroom at my closet, it was not a ghost or a monster I feared behind its doors. No. I never told my parents, or anyone else, about what I thought was lurking in there.

It was a car. A small, black, but lethal car, crouched in the shadows among my toys and games, inches below the reach of the hem of my winter coat. The car's cruel bulk took up every inch of space inside the closet. I believed it retreated inside the eaves of the house during the day, somehow expanding and contracting, driving around and around silently in an unseen rectangular tunnel. At night, the car would start again, and it would creep into my closet and wait, engine idling. If I were to open the closet then, its headlights would spring on, I would be blinded, and then, I would be crushed as it roared forward, splintering the closet door, reducing it to shreds.

The car haunted me all the way through second grade. I've never understood where my belief in it came from, or where it eventually went.

I tell you that story so I can tell you two more. Two things that happened to me later in life. Two events completely unrelated to each other, more than two decades apart.

It makes sense to me now that because of phantom cars in childhood closets, and only four years later, a horror on a train in the middle of the night, I became, at age twenty-seven, an air traffic controller. Through talk therapy I eventually came to see that my experience on the train, and perhaps even with the car of my childhood nightmares, had altered my mind deeply. They had made me subconsciously forge a lifelong connection to the structures and machinery of transit—in particular its rigid order, its logical timetables, structure, and geometry. I wanted to immerse myself in that strict linear world and cause it always to make perfect sense, in direct reaction to being paralyzed by the mysteries of what I had experienced.

I studied hard, trained my brain to master pattern recognition, perceptual awareness, and critical thinking. I was good at what I did, I believe. And nothing bizarre or inexplicable ever happened during my career in ATC outside say, a Lear jet encountering almost fatal wind shear ten bare seconds before landing, or, in one memorable instance, undetected clear ice breaking off the wing of a DC-10 and destroying an engine as the plane took off from Stapleton Airport, causing a near crash that would have been partially my fault for communicating ineffectively about the ditch route that was available to the pilot should she need it. Her experience and alertness corrected my cognitive blip, and everything was all right. I punished myself for weeks over that one, but eventually felt fine again, enjoying my job and its relative predictability. I went home after every shift feeling like there was order in the world, and I was a part of maintaining that order. Life was fine until Kan-Al Airlines flight 111, on July 21, 2013.

It was a routine passenger jet trip from Houston Hobby Airport to Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, leaving at 8:15 a.m. central time with one hundred and twenty-one souls on board. The cockpit crew were Captain Daniel Hengist, age forty-four, and co-pilot Ronald Carmin, age thirty-three. I first made contact with the plane from Kansas City Air Route Traffic Control Center at 9:41 a.m. central time when it entered Missouri airspace in bright morning sunlight. We shared the usual cruising altitude communications, until we didn't.

KC Air Traffic Control: Kan-Al 111, climb and maintain flight level three-four-zero.

Captain: Kan-Al 111 heavy, level three-four-zero.

(twenty second interim)

KC Air Traffic Control: Kan-Al 111, turn left heading zero-four-zero, want to keep you away from traffic. We'll straighten you out shortly.

Captain: Roger, 111 heavy, left heading zero-four-zero. Can you tell me how far away that traffic is?

KC Air Traffic Control: Kan-Al 111, approximately six miles, heading due east.

Captain: Roger.

(forty second interim)

Captain: Kan-Al 111 heavy. I need a check on the weather at our current location, we're seeing a lot of darkness up ahead.

KC Air Traffic Control: Kan-Al 111, now winds two-three-zero degrees, five knots. Cloud base six-three-zero meters. Visibility six thousand. No shear.

Captain: 111, confirmed, I match. Any reports of anything different? We have different visuals, we have heavy approaching darkness all around, increasing darkness.

KC Air Traffic Control: 111, no, and no reports from aircraft ahead. Two landings at Joplin, neither reported any problems.

Captain: Thank you. We're not showing anything either on avionics, but visibility all around is... it's gone to near dark up here in every direction, from clear and high visibility.

KC Air Traffic Control: 111, do you want to descend, do you want a block?

Captain: Can you give me a block between twenty and twenty-five so I can take a different look?

KC Air Traffic Control: 111, descend to block altitude flight level two-zero-zero through flight level two-five-zero.

Captain: Yeah, we'll take that block. We're gonna report back in about five minutes.

KC Air Traffic Control: Roger 111.

(three minute interim)

Captain: Kan-Al 111. We have total darkness all around the aircraft, we have no visual with the ground. Can you get me out of here?

KC Air Traffic Control: Okay, ah, 111, you should have Whiteman AFB down below in about two minutes and then Skyhaven off to your left.

Captain: No, no, we have—ah, we're in a total blackout up here, we have no visual with the ground, no cloud cover, we're in nothing that registers.

KC Air Traffic Control: Kan-Al 111, is the co-pilot in the cockpit?

Captain: 111 heavy. The co-pilot's in the cabin, the FAs are reporting one or two unsettled passengers back there, the aircraft's mine. Maintaining flight level two-zero-zero.

KC Air Traffic Control: All right sir, I don't want to take you down any further, but let's turn left heading zero-six-zero, let's give you whatever look we can.

Captain: Roger, turning left heading zero-six-zero. Again, we have total darkness around the aircraft. I have no idea what cell this is, can you give me another look at the weather?

KC Air Traffic Control: 111, on the ATIS, winds two-one-zero degrees, five knots. Cloud base five-three-zero meters. Visibility, six thousand. No shear.

Captain: 111 heavy, I'm gonna need some kind of other look from some other source, because we're in some kind of system, some kind of sunspot, something. It's just getting darker.

KC Air Traffic Control: Roger 111. I have a confirmation of no systems from MCI Tower but I'll look around for you.

(communication to Alaska Air Flight 261)

KC Air Traffic Control: Alaska 261, contact center on one-two-six-point-five-two.

Alaska Air Captain: Alaska 261, good day.

KC Air Traffic Control: 261, this is ZKC, requesting you make a visual on an Airbus A330 at ten o'clock, about four miles, Kan-Al 111.

Alaska Air Captain: 261, we'll let you know when we get it.

KC Air Traffic Control: 261, experienced any heavy clouds or storm systems since waypoint CAPER?

Alaska Air Captain: Negative.

KC Air Traffic Control: OK, ah, he's having some visual problems up there, if you can let me know. As far as we know he doesn't have any intent of going below 20,000 feet.

Alaska Air Captain: 261. Will advise.

When I was nine years old, my parents put me on a train alone to go visit my grandparents in Fargo, a twelve-hour overnight trip and terribly exciting to a boy that age. My first time on the rails. I was seated beside a young woman whose name I tried and tried to remember over the years, always unable. In her late twenties, she was returning east from Los Angeles after two years of frustration trying to break into the film industry as an actress. She at first thought I was simply bored and needed some entertaining, so she offered to play Uno with me, and that led to her regaling me with the funny stories of her misadventures in Hollywood—the awful temp jobs, the degrading auditions, the occasional brushes with celebrities whose names I mostly didn't even recognize. I think now she simply misinterpreted my shyness for worry about being by myself on the train, but I didn't mind. She was a lot of fun, yet even at nine I could detect a real sadness in her, because she didn't like what she was returning to at all, was obviously feeling humiliated, worried about money, feeling like a failure.

She had to get off in Montana, very close to Glacier National Park, in the middle of the night, at a small town called Markspur. I didn't really know how the train schedule worked, that no matter what the weather was like, all stops had to be made and the passengers who were due to disembark had to. A snowstorm was tearing through the state at the time, and it felt like a miracle to me that we could keep going as the snow continued to pile up outside the windows. Hopped up on candy bars from the café car, I was still wide awake at half past two in the morning when the actress packed up her things and squeezed past me into the aisle.

Come see me off, I remember her saying cheerfully, and I was happy to. We crept quietly through the dark between all the sleeping passengers and made our way to the lower level into a bleak, gray, somewhat chilly steel vestibule, where a plump conductor was standing and preparing to open a door to let out anyone scheduled to get off at Markspur. But this seemed to be just my new friend. She didn't have anyone coming to meet her, for reasons she never said.

Captain: Kan-Al 111 heavy. We're maintaining flight level one-eight-zero, nothing visible in any direction, any direction at all. We are totally curtained, dark all around.

KC Air Traffic Control: Roger 111. Can we get the co-pilot back in the cabin?

Captain: Efforting that, not getting any comm back from the cabin, it's been several minutes, will inform.

KC Air Traffic Control: Okay, let me know as soon as he's back up there. Can I get your fuel in gallons?

Captain: Gallons of fuel two-eight-one-zero.

KC Air Traffic Control: Roger 111. Descend to flight level one-four-zero, maintain airspeed, you're clear. Let me know as soon as you see something, you've got Macon right below you, beyond that we're gonna put you into a right-hand orbit, vector you to the KIPIT waypoint.

Captain: 111 heavy, descending to flight level one-four-zero.

(two minute interim)

KC Air Traffic Control: Kan-Al 111, I've lost you on radar.

Captain: I'm here. Transponder functioning. I have no communication with the cabin.

(two minute interim)

Captain: This is Kan-Al 111 heavy. We've lost the passengers.

KC Air Traffic Control: 111, say again?

Captain: Cabin pressure steady. We've lost the passengers, I have no visual on any passengers, I have no FAs, no co-pilot.

KC Air Traffic Control: 111, confirm that you're looking at the cabin directly, the cockpit door is open?

Captain: Affirmative, I see no passengers, I have no comm with the FAs, there's no one back there.

KC Air Traffic Control: 111, confirm you're saying there are no passengers?

Captain: Affirmative. The craft is not on your radar?

KC Air Traffic Control: Affirmative, you are not on radar. Has there been a cabin breach?

Captain: Negative, no breach.

KC Air Traffic Control: Sir, what's your altitude?

Captain: Holding at one-four-zero.

KC Air Traffic Control: Can you give me a pressurization reading?

Captain: Five-point-nine PSI. I feel absolutely fine. No Ecam warnings, engine parameters normal.

KC Air Traffic Control: 111, I can have you set down, do you want to declare an emergency?

Captain: Affirmative, declaring an emergency, where can you vector me?

KC Air Traffic Control: I can bring you into Schenck Field or Council Bluffs depending on traffic. You'll be flying with only ILS, correct?

Captain: Affirmative, ILS. Bring me into Schenck. Jesus Christ, the passengers are gone, the seats are all empty.

KC Air Traffic Control: Okay 111, we're gonna bring you down, we're gonna get some visuals for you, instruct Schenck tower to light things up for you.

(one minute interim)

KC Air Traffic Control: Kan-Al 111, turn left heading three-five-zero to intercept the localizer, maintain flight level one-two-zero, cleared ILS into runway 18R, contact tower at 118.27.

Captain: 111, turning left heading three-five-zero, flight level one-two-zero. Want to affirm that I have no passengers and no crew. No visuals outside the cockpit, no variance whatsoever. No anomalous readings. I am in complete darkness. Running lights are non-functional.

KC Air Traffic Control: Alaska 261, you back with me?

Alaska Air Captain: Alaska 261, affirmative. We've not been able to make a visual.

KC Air Traffic Control: Can you tell me your weather up there?

Alaska Air Captain: 261, weather is fine, we have sun, winds 8 knots, ran into a little C.A.T. a few minutes ago.

KC Air Traffic Control: Okay 261, he should be two miles away at 40 degrees. Let me know when you see him.

(seven minute interim)

Alaska Air Captain: ZKC, we have no aircraft. We have eyes in the cockpit, eyes in the cabin, we don't have anything. You want us to increase airspeed?

KC Air Traffic Control: Negative 261, not safe, he's in and out of radar. I'm gonna get back to you in a few.

At about two and a half hours past midnight in a brutally cold and windy January, the actress and I stood near a luggage rack in the steel vestibule on the bottom floor of the cross-country train, watching the landscape roll past the window. And I felt afraid. The snow was coming down hard, blowing sideways, and as the train entered Markspur the entire little town was dark, everyone asleep or hidden away. The station itself was nothing more than a small, dimly lit square brick enclosure. It was unattended and I barely saw it go past, so intense was the snowfall. As the engine quieted, I could hear the wind howling. The actress planned to call for a taxi from inside the building.

She bundled up and prepared to get off. I was amazed that anyone would be so heartless as to let her off in conditions like this. She offered me a last smile and the train car stopped a few hundred feet past the station, where the platform was not fully lit. Seeing how underdressed I was for the conditions, the conductor made sure with a smile that *I* wasn't planning on disembarking. I shrunk away from him. He lowered his head and opened the door, and though I was standing well behind the actress, the wind blew in and hit me hard. I know now that the temperature at that time of year in Montana can get down to ten or even twenty below zero. I had never felt cold like that before, and never have since.

I couldn't see more than twenty feet through the dark and the driving snow. My friend, almost unrecognizable in a confused mass of hats, scarves, and gloves, turned and gave me a cheerful wave, and then stepped off, hoisting her stuffed backpack over her shoulder. She climbed carefully down the stepstool the conductor had placed for her and began to walk down the platform, head down against the shameless wind, navigating with difficulty through about six inches of snow covering the cement. The conductor, shivering, pummeled by the snow, hopped back on board quickly and pulled the door shut fast, grimacing. He tipped his cap to me and mounted the stairs again to the upper level, leaving me alone.

I watched my friend out the window. Instead of walking all the way to the station, she seemed to catch sight of a cab in the parking lot behind it. I could just barely see its shape out there, waiting. Only its running lights were on. She must have thought she'd gotten lucky. She went down three steps and began to cross an empty square patch about thirty yards long and thirty yards wide, holding tight to a thin railing. She set foot on the ground, shuffling through the rising accumulation, arms wrapped tightly around her, the wind so high that her balance was unsteady.

The train began to move out of the station; I would learn later that it was not usual procedure to have such a brief stop, but the engineer was likely worried about more and more snow building up on the tracks. I had lost almost all visual detail of what was going on out there. My friend was just a shape in the darkness now, obscured by the storm.

I saw something happen to her then. From three different directions—her left and right side, and directly before her—three separate and distinct forms emerged from somewhere within the blizzard. They loomed above her, not less than eight feet high, I believe. They had no human properties, these dark things without heads, without arms. I think she stopped where she was for just a brief second, in fright, before all three of the things almost simultaneously enfolded her by spreading out wide, winglike masses from their sides, floating forward.

And then the train was too far past this sight for me to follow it any longer.

KC Air Traffic Control: Kan-Al 111, contact 193.12.

KC Air Traffic Control: Kan-Al 111, contact 193.12.

KC Air Traffic Control: Kan-Al 111, contact 193.12.

(one minute interim)

Captain: 111 heavy, I'm down.

KC Air Traffic Control: 111, we have no radar contact, can you give me your position?

Captain: It's pitch black, I'm on the ground. There's nothing outside the cockpit.

KC Air Traffic Control: Can you exit the aircraft, sir? Have others exited the aircraft?

Captain: There are no other souls on board.

KC Air Traffic Control: Confirm that you're on the ground and the engines are down?

(one minute interim)

Captain: Oh Jesus, there's children out there. They're children. They're coming.

(thirty second interim)

Captain: There are children coming toward the plane. They have fire, they're holding fire in their hands.

KC Air Traffic Control: Okay, let's get you out of the plane, sir, let's get you out of there. Have you been able to contact the cabin?

Captain: I'm not moving, they're going to hurt me.

KC Air Traffic Control: Is there anything about your position you can tell me from your visual?

(thirty second interim)

Captain: There's been a starboard rear door unlock.

(one minute interim)

KC Air Traffic Control: Sir, are you with me?

Captain: They're on board. I can hear them. I can he—

(thirty second interim)

KC Air Traffic Control: Sir, are you with me?

KC Air Traffic Control: Sir, are you with me?

There was no making sense of what I saw when my friend, the actress, vanished in the snow in Markspur. I retreated to the safety of my seat upstairs, where no one could see me crying. I didn't know who to tell, who to turn to. So I did nothing. Somehow I knew she was gone, simply gone, stolen or devoured. I never slept that night, and when my grandparents met me at the station in Spokane the next morning, I became ill and had difficulty moving from bed for two days. Eventually, when I was sixteen, I think, I did tell someone what I had seen. They didn't believe me.

At the age of twenty, I took the train back through Markspur on my way home for spring break. I got off at that lonely little station in bright noon sunlight and stood in the grassy spot where my friend had disappeared. Some months before, I'd finally found out her name from the archives of the *Montana Standard*. Sandy Maglie, a woman of twenty-eight, had disappeared on her way home to her parents' house on Bolt Street, a mile and a half away. She had never been found. There were no suspects in her disappearance.

That is the story of my train trip.

Three and a half years after the utter vanishing of Kan-Al Airlines flight 111, the National Transportation Safety Board was finally obliged to release to the public its findings about the nature and possible causes of the incident. Naturally, there were almost no conclusions that illuminated this now-famous mystery. I printed out the full 616-page report and drove with it to my father's house in Olympia for Easter. I took the pages upstairs to my childhood bedroom after dinner and settled atop the bed for the evening with a cup of tea. How odd it was to read the report and see my words to the aircraft reproduced there in black and white, part of the incident forever. I was criticized in the report for failing to confirm with the captain the number of souls on board when he first declared an emergency, a standard query when there's the slightest possibility of a serious in-flight incident, in particular a crash. As I read, my father, eighty-four that night, was downstairs reading a biography of Neville Chamberlain.

Just before eleven p.m., I heard the squealing of tires outside in the street. The house was at the end of a cul de sac in a very quiet, middle class neighborhood, and such a sound was cause for alarm. An engine revved, the sound getting closer. I got off my old bed and went to my window.

I saw headlights about two hundred yards away, approaching. The car seemed to be gaining speed, already travelling at perhaps fifty miles per hour on a road where the speed limit was twenty-five. It was headed on a straight shot directly for the house.

It was too late to do much of anything. I could only watch. When the car made no sign whatsoever of braking as it came to within fifty yards of our lawn, I yelled out for my father at the top of my lungs. The car jumped the curb and tore across the grass, bouncing chaotically, and then vanished below my sightline. I heard it crash through the plate glass window downstairs as it tore into the home I'd lived in until the age of nineteen.

I ran frantically down the stairs, smelling gasoline. The car had smashed in, destroyed everything in the living room, and then crashed into the wall separating it from the dining room. It had gone almost halfway through it before it banked violently to the left and came to a halt, the front end demolished all the way up to the windshield. Glass, cement, and drywall were sprayed everywhere. The engine was still running, though no power was being applied to it.

It was black, that car, almost rusted through around the wheel wheels, a 1977 Volvo 242 without license plates. Still screaming for my father, I clambered atop the ruined upturned sofa he'd spent so much time on in his later years and jumped down next to the driver's side door. I pulled on it hard; it could just barely open all the way without striking the carpet, so severe was the tilt at which the car had come to rest.

There was a man in the driver's seat, a man only twelve years younger than my elderly father. Somehow, without wearing a seat belt, he had not only survived, but he seemed to be without a scratch. He turned his head to look at me. He had a strange, horrible smile on his face, as if he had a sly little secret to impart to me.

I made it, he said, and then, eyes still open, his chest stopped rising and falling, and he simply stopped living. My father had died fifteen seconds before, crushed under the car's repulsive weight.

There would be no finding out why this madman had chosen our neighborhood to execute his insane journey when the city on whose streets he lived, homeless, was more than thirty miles away. Or why he'd stolen this particular car from a salvage yard garage there. Or why it had even started after so many years of neglect. It all just happened. The car from my closet had waited three decades to come out, and come out it finally did.

I am on a boat now. I have seen something out on the water, to my left, that has made me very afraid, even as people enjoy themselves at the bar, hold the hands of dates, take selfies on the upper deck, upload those photos to social media. There is someone approaching the cruise boat in a very tiny one, not much more than a skiff really, some little thing puttering across the calm surface of the bay towards us. I see a figure sitting in the back on the skiff, operating the motor, while another figure stands, watching the cruise boat as they come closer. And I know in my gut that something is about to happen to us, as inexplicable as what happened to the people on that plane in 2013, to that actress getting off the train in 1990, to my father two years ago.

This time, I am sure, *I* will be the victim, I and everyone aboard this craft. The sun has gone behind a cloud and the skiff is coming ever closer, taking its time. What harm could it and the two figures on board possibly cause us? a detached observer might think, but as I have said, I have this feeling. I have witnessed bizarre and legendary fates having to do with all manner of transit, you see, so I've developed this sense. This won't be a simple act of terrorism or piracy. The little boat that draws near is bringing something which will confound reporters and investigators forever, something to bend the imagination in permanent, terrible ways.

I'm getting up from my seat now, to go up on the deck. I want to meet whatever's coming in the fresh air. Let it be said that even after all I witnessed, I never was afraid to embrace travel, to tilt my face to the sky and revel in riding through ever-expanding space on the wondrous machinery of humankind.

laborer

My name is Nathaniel Rand. I guess you'd call me an office drone, a somewhat capable generalist who's most at home in antiseptic white collar environments and has never had any special skill except knowing how to get along in the cubicle life. The only difference between me and millions of other slacks-wearing zombies is that I once worked in the Nordhagen Building, at 1060 Technology Lane, Black Hawk, Colorado, forty-five minutes outside Denver. In my second week at Nordhagen as a marketing coordinator in 1998, a co-worker named Billy Shell began to tell me all the stories about the building I would come to know so well. It was famous only to the people who worked there, a slowly changing roster of six or seven companies spread across just a few floors.

The glass and brick building was situated at the tip of a maze of a dozen others built on a giant boring loop. They were all depressingly alike, but everything on the loop was verdant and shaded. 1060 backed right up against the edge of Rocky Mountain National Park, and deer wandered through the parking lot constantly, even a wild turkey once. Very nice treeline views out there in the middle of nowhere, and if I was outdoorsy at all I could get on two long trails leading into the woods just a half mile from where I left my Honda Civic each morning.

The real attraction of 1060, though, Billy explained to me as we microwaved our lunches in Nordhagen's break room, was its history of the bizarre. *I got three stories for ya*, I remember him saying that day, twenty-one years ago now.

According to Billy, back in 1990 there was a poor customer service rep at a pharmaceutical call center on the second floor who kept getting weird calls from a strange man named Rolf Burba. He would dial in and tell the rep that there were faces growing in the trees around the building, building 1060. He called them "crazy graveyard faces." He claimed he kept driving through the parking lot in the middle of the night to try to catch them growing. He made five or six calls over the course of a month. The rep could almost always hear, in the background, many dogs barking viciously. In his last call, the recording of which the rep's manager finally sent to the police, Burba said the faces had crawled inside his head.

That afternoon, the day before the July 4th holiday, a couple of people at Nordhagen were looking out the window of the head accountant's office and noticed a beat-up gray Oldsmobile cruising around and around the parking lot very slowly, at about five miles per hour in a meaningless rectangle, again and again. Ten minutes later, someone reported that the car had driven into the trees near the south entrance. A bunch of people ran out under the hot sun and saw a man, later identified as Rolf Burba, slumped behind the wheel, engine still running, the doors locked, the windows rolled up. Someone called 911.

The first responders had to break him out of there. The interior vents were closed. Burba had gotten in his car and on this ninety degree day he had driven slowly and steadily for about thirty-five minutes until he'd lost consciousness, and then died, suffocating, having deliberately entombed himself. There was an 8 ½ x 11 piece of paper wildly overtaped to the steering wheel. On it was a primitive yet elaborate pencil sketch of a tree with dozens of human faces hanging from the branches, all with their eyes closed.

And what was the deal with this guy Burba? I asked Billy, but he just said, “Oh, the boring backstory is never the point of this stuff.”

A week later he described the story of the ghost. The ghost was a phenomenon from the mid-eighties, around the time Technology Lane was first built. A woman at a now-defunct engineering firm had been working late on the third floor of 1060, in the huge suite across a common area from Nordhagen, and had gone into one of its conference rooms for one reason or another, but then backed out again. She’d seen an unfamiliar man sitting at the head of the conference table, staring emptily into space, palms flat on the table. He was mostly bald, wearing a white buttoned shirt and tie. He was unresponsive when the woman said something to him, didn’t even move his eyes. He seemed frozen. There’d never been any security staff in the building, no main front desk down in the lobby, so she locked herself in her office and called the police as she watched the hallway, knowing that this man would have to move right past her window to get off the third floor. But when they came, they found no one.

About fifteen months later, an outfit on the first floor called Executive Choice Real Estate staged its annual Christmas party in the office, thirty or forty people milling around with appetizers and beer, and afterward the receptionist had lingered, cleaning up and checking a few messages. Looking down the long hallway that went past a couple of dozen offices, she saw a man standing under an exit sign, seeming to watch her. Medium height and weight, tie and white shirt and slacks, balding. She didn’t recognize him. She raised a hand to him. No response.

She turned away, and when she turned back, she was struck with a vision the likes of which she’d never had before. That same man had been divided into pieces all around the hallway: neat, bloodless pieces like he was made of plastic or porcelain. His head on the carpet, a leg stuck to the wall somehow, a foot sitting on the round reception desk just a few feet from her. Half of his torso in one place, the other half in another. And then, just as quickly, he was gone, it was all gone.

That’s all there really is to that, Billy said, but the two sightings were enough to make everyone’s imaginations run wild. Billy theorized the ghost might be the Chief Financial Officer of the first company ever to sign a lease at 1060; only a year afterward he’d died just a few miles away from the building, having gotten lost in the woods near Dakota Hill and trapped by a snowstorm. Whoever the phantom may have been, everyone at Nordhagen seemed to know of someone who’d encountered him over the years, though no one could actually confirm seeing him, naturally.

Billy had the tact to wait another week to tell me the last horror tale about Building 1060. This one originated within Nordhagen Product Analysts itself. During an afternoon break, Billy took me into the stairwell leading up to the unoccupied fourth floor. If you went straight through a door at the top of the stairs, you’d find yourself in a huge unleased office suite; but if you took a left, as we did that day, you wound up at a dead end and a door with no markings. Billy opened it and ushered me inside a very small, utterly empty room with cement walls painted light green. Six years before, an editorial assistant named Danny had popped into that empty room an hour ahead of giving a presentation to his team. He was nervous about it and wanted to run through its intro all alone.

He noticed that one of the big cement bricks had been removed from one of the walls, creating a rectangular gap leading into hollow darkness. He was curious so he got close to it, and he could hear voices, from far away, as if from deep within the wall.

The voices belonged to two women who claimed to have been buried inside the foundation of the building. They were sisters, they said. When Danny offered to go get help, they said it was far too late. It had happened years and years ago, and now, they were dead. When Billy returned with someone, the voices did not. No one seemed to remember any follow-up, or how or when the hole was filled back in. Billy pointed out to me the inconsistency in the paint where it had been.

He had a fascination with all the stories, he said, and others like them, because his father had once experienced, on a farm in Kansas back in the thirties, something horrible and unreal, something Billy swore to tell me about someday, someday, but he never did.

The three unrelated stories about building 1060 he told me were somewhat corroborated—kind of, sort of—over the first six months I worked there as I brought them up with people I felt comfortable with. But a guy down the hall from me told me that Danny, the editorial assistant who'd heard the voices, had long had problems balancing several medications, and had experienced a breakdown the year before. Someone else told me there had been only one true sighting of the alleged white collar ghost, and that he'd actually haunted the elevator instead. A third person said Rolf Burba had simply died of a heart attack, not killed himself in that strange way inside his car, and there was no twisted drawing in there on the steering wheel. Variations on all these stories were rampant.

People had additional legends to explain why the floor above us, the fourth, had never been occupied, but I thought a weak economy was probably to blame. I was a skeptic and didn't really believe any of what I was told. But I was thankful, at least, that 1060 had been given just a little bit of flavor, because my tedious job at Nordhagen certainly had none.

What happened to me there happened in early December of 1999. It was a Saturday. I'd left work early on Friday for a doctor's appointment and I was worried about falling behind on a sales project. Knowing I'd feel stressed all day Sunday if I didn't do something about it, I decided to drive to the office to get some folders and work on them back at home, which wasn't unusual. But I had to wait until some snow passed through and didn't turn into anything major. There were three inches on the ground as I drove the ten miles to Technology Lane, but nothing more seemed to be coming.

It was about 8:15, three hours past nightfall, when I got to the loop. Mine was the only car in the parking lot of 1060. I have to say, I'd been having a strange feeling about the building for about two weeks. It was because of how its look had been transformed due to a round of major renovations taking place on the west side. The building had always had a black, almost featureless façade, the kind you don't even notice. But I remember a drizzly day when I'd been standing outside the front entrance at about five, waiting for Billy to come down so I could carpool home with him, and looking up at the glass and brick building and being surprised at how indefinably eerie it had suddenly become.

At that point, the renovations had resulted in the removal of some high upper windows and a lot of brickwork, and transparent plastic sheeting covered almost the whole northwest corner of the place. It rustled in the wind a lot and looked to me like an enormous tourniquet masking

a wound. I thought I was being irrational until Billy joined me on the sidewalk and got kind of mesmerized by the sight. He said that the sheeting reminded him of what his father had gone through so long ago in Kansas, but he stopped there. Seen from our angle, the edge of the building was backdropped by a bleak, bruised sky and those tall secretive trees on the edge of the forest. A bit of haunted house atmosphere in white collar surroundings.

On the night I'm writing about, I swiped my key card and entered the building. No lights were on in the lobby, which was very cold. The workmen had to go in and out of the back of the building so often they'd taking to propping the loading doors open, and after a few hours of that every day you could really feel the difference. They must have been working that day then, I thought, here on the weekend, and someone must still be inside somewhere, maybe a whole crew, but there was no distant sound of tools being operated. Three construction trucks sat against the curb, but they hadn't moved for days.

Paranoid about getting trapped in the building's spotty elevators with no one around to come rescue me, I took the stairs to the third floor instead. The door into the stairwell was propped open. Lots of paint cans were stacked in the nook under the steps. I didn't like being in the stairwell because of the emergency lights. They gave everything a sick, intense red glow. It was like being in a photographer's darkroom.

It was like that on the third floor too, where there was no entry/exit door at all; the stairs merely opened right onto it. I'd never seen the emergency lights on here before, but then, I'd never been in the building on the weekend or late at night. I swiped my keycard again, and through a set of glass doors entered Nordhagen's reception area and went down the hallway, feeling like a red alien in a badly lit sci-fi movie.

I decided to help myself to a cup of coffee from the nice machine our CEO had bought for us—why not? I turned the lights on in the break room. It felt strange, to have them on when I was surrounded by so much darkness. From there I walked into what we called the Fishbowl, a conference room with two glass walls, and I looked out over the parking lot, just for the view. Flurries were still coming down. The sky over the forest was lifeless, some gray swirling in all that black.

I left there and walked to my office. I hit the lights, grabbed the folders I needed, and then foolishly decided on a coffee refill back in the break room. In reaching for the creamer, I knocked my cup over, directly onto my pile of folders.

Releasing a volley of profanity, I scrambled for the paper towels, and of course, as in every office kitchen across America, no one had replaced the empty roll. I didn't even know where they were kept. I grabbed the folders and barged out the side door directly near the elevator bank, where the bathrooms were set into little niches. I squinted in that bath of red light and punched the four digit door code, which I still remember to this day, 1919. I carried the folders to the sink, needing to work fast before some documents very important to me were ruined.

Under the white fluorescents I managed to save almost all of them, but it took a giant stack of those cruddy light brown rectangular folded paper sheets, which I used to dab the pages over and over again, trying to be delicate. I was proud of my patience; I was at it for almost ten minutes. Then I stuck the folders in the crook of my arm again and got ready to move to the door.

That was when I heard something from just beyond that door. First came a small thump, like a heavy weight had leaned against it for just a moment. Then a single low, wet, *snorting* sound. Made by something big. At almost the same moment, I detected an odor from out there, a dank, earthy smell with an undertone of meat that was going bad.

It was extraordinary, I think, how still I became, unblinking, unbreathing. I know it's hyperbole but I want to say I slowed the very blood in my veins. There was utter silence for several seconds, almost ten I would say, and then I heard that clumsy shifting of weight again. Little by little, the not-quite-foul odor dissipated. I heard no footsteps.

Standing safely in an enclosure that couldn't be entered without a code, I had a lot of time to think through all the possibilities and permutations of what had appeared beyond the door. That it was some kind of animal, I was almost sure. I kept coming back to an extraordinary possibility, which, as random and as uncanny as it was, made sense. I tried to deny it to myself, but even with my brain and my heart racing almost out of control, I knew that I had to stop and consider it seriously.

I thought about the draft that had pervaded the bottom floor, the open loading doors from which it had come, and about the door to the stairwell down there, which had been propped open. I thought about Rocky Mountain National Park beside us, and its wildlife population, and how so few of us had ever gone down the trail that led off the nearby parking lot, even for a lunchtime stroll, because everyone knew, of course, that we truly were neighbors with the wild, even *tenants* of the wild out there on the loop that had been cut out of it. We knew that people camped and hiked and got lost only a mile or so from our parking lot, and that the woods held within them everything that lived out here at the base of the mountains.

That snorting sound, not like anything I'd heard before. *That was a bear*, I thought to myself, *and you know it was a bear*. Maybe like the one Jeannie Milluth, a graphic designer, had told me bluff-charged her and her boyfriend in September on Bald Mountain, a black bear that had scared them so badly in a sudden rainstorm she still had nightmares about it.

On the night I stood trapped in that bathroom, it was the beginning of hibernation season, and of course, there was always a part of the bear population that became anxious and desperate if the feeding hadn't been sufficient in the previous weeks, likely to behave erratically and wander well outside their normal hunting grounds in search of food. They were almost always docile, but one driven to pursue sustenance to an extreme might not be. And it would have to be truly desperate to come into our building through doors kept open against the rules. I couldn't eliminate the possibility that it had smelled me from far away, and maybe had even been trying to find me for as long as I'd been inside the building. Stalking me. Maybe even from the moment I'd gotten out of my car. A black bear's killing ability was immense.

There was nothing to do but wait, so wait is exactly what I did, standing beside the sink, immobile. I considered the layout beyond that bathroom door. Just a few steps outside it to the right was the stairwell that had no door at all. To the left, the niche where the women's bathroom was, and then a short run of hallway opening up at the bank of elevators.

Whatever was out there didn't have very many options; Nordhagen and the engineering firm on the other side of the common area were safely locked.

I would say it was a full half hour before I worked up the nerve to abandon my folders on the sink and walk toward the bathroom door. I pressed my ear against it and spent another ten minutes just listening. The only sound was the faint buzz of the fluorescents above me.

I turned the doorknob and pushed just a few inches. That grim, essence-sucking red light crept in. I inhaled deeply, but smelled nothing. I pushed the door open a little further, enough to stick my head out into the niche where the door to the men's room was recessed, and became a statue again.

I didn't want to try to make it to the entrance of our office suite because the elevator bank was around a corner, cut off from my sightline. I might have to swipe my keycard more than once before the electronic impulse allowed me in, and then I would have to move several more feet to my left to grasp the door handle. Option two was moving into the stairwell that was so close to my right. To get to safety, I'd just have to move up one twisting flight to the empty fourth floor, which was barred by a door that had been unlocked as long as I could remember. And why shouldn't it have been? That door, Billy had told me, was there just to make the fourth floor, the penthouse suite as it were, seem more private, secure and desirable to prospective tenants. It would take maybe five seconds to reach it and get through. But once upstairs, I'd likely find no working telephone if I wanted to call someone for help.

What I was scared to try was the downward route: three twisting flights in the darkness with a bad sight line around each corner, leading to a long run out the entrance. Probably as much as thirty seconds to get out, and more blind spots on the way than I wanted to imagine.

I pushed the bathroom door open all the way and closed it behind me with unbearable slowness, trying to minimize that click as it shut. I crept beyond the niche. After a half hour of exposure to harsh white light, my retinas could make even less detail out of the red darkness than before. I slipped into the stairwell to my right.

If I'd had any thoughts about trying to improvise and make my way down to the lobby, they ended when I saw how that route seemed to have swallowed the light entirely. It was so black down there, an effect I know now must have been a mostly psychological barrier, because that's where I had just come from.

Once I made my final decision, I was quick. Eight steps up to the pivot stair, then eight more up to the door, taking two at a time, just barely able to see my feet. I yanked on the door, and yes, it opened easily. I pulled it behind me fast and the latch clicked home.

The fourth floor was bathed not in red emergency lighting but only the paltry glow off mandatory exit signs mounted to the ceiling tiles. I moved a few steps into a wide central corridor, a long, long straightaway to the northern edge of the building. I could see almost all the way down it, past two dozen empty offices, because here, there was natural moonlight. All the office doors were open and that moonlight came in through their plentiful wide windows, the ones that held the best views of the forest.

It was cold, colder than it had even been down in the lobby. Plastic sheeting blocked off many of the office doors on the west side of the hall, but some of it hadn't been properly fastened or sealed, and each sheet rustled like a dress, billowing out into the hall.

In that moment, at about 9:20 p.m., I walked forward on the musty carpet in the hopes of finding a phone connected somewhere, looking to my left and right as I went past all those office doors. The offices were barren, all of them, though sometimes temporary wooden supports and half-walls draped with ever more plastic sheeting had been constructed within.

I was halfway to the end of the corridor, exactly halfway I believe, when someone came out of a room about forty feet away. A very tall, thin man in a heavy winter coat. A member of the work crew, I figured. I slowed my step and raised a hand in a wave. I felt a huge surge of relief not to be alone. I walked forward and said, "We need to stay here for now, there might be an animal, a big animal, down on three."

And he said, *Ohhhhhhhhhh. It's nice up here. I want to stay. I want to stay.*

There was something about him aside from his manner that made me stop. He was missing his right shoe. That's it, that's all there was about him physically to sour my feeling of relief and give me a sense that this person was not to be approached. His pace forward was much slower than mine, as if he wanted time to evaluate me.

Something caught my attention off to the right. I was next to a room bigger than most of the others. A conference room, with no furniture or ornamentation inside it but a long blank whiteboard mounted to one wall. I looked into that room for no more than three seconds by my calculation, and I have calculated many times. What I saw in that room was so awful, my terror spiked to such a degree that it was great enough, a doctor told me later, to physically damage my heart. I took an involuntary step backward.

The man in the heavy winter coat at the end of the hall saw my reaction to the room, and he began to come faster.

I turned and ran. I heard the man's labored, strangely high-pitched breathing as he came after me and I heard the weight of his footsteps on the carpet.

It was six seconds, at most, until I got to the door to the stairwell. I hit it hard. From my side, it opened outward. Sometimes I wonder if the extra second that would have been required to open it inward might have cost me my life.

I slammed the door behind me. My momentum did not wane. I plunged downward into the darkness, almost blind, the red light pouring over me. Down four bending flights of stairs, one hand on the rail beside me for balance, praying I didn't collide suddenly with something big and heavy. Once out of the stairwell I blundered through a short passageway into the lobby, not looking anywhere but straight ahead.

I ran for the glass front doors and was quickly out into the parking lot after hitting the push bar so frantically that I sprained my left ring finger, requiring a splint. The best statement on the condition of my mind at that moment was that I pulled on the front door of my car four times, with rising fury and confusion, until I remembered that yes, it took a key to open it, the key in my front pocket.

I finally looked behind me. The building was dark and silent. Nothing was coming, neither man nor animal.

My car started smoothly and I started to drive to the loop... and then I did see him, finally, my pursuer, just a tall black shape behind the glass entrance doors, looking out, inert, knowing he had been too slow, and that I couldn't be had. I hit the brakes and we looked at each other, making out what little we could. Then I hit the gas and got out of there. Three miles away, I stopped at an Exxon station and made the call. The police went right in through the open loading doors of 1060, but were unable to save the victim they discovered in the conference room on the fourth floor.

The man in the winter coat was named Timothy Geiger, and he'd been living in Rocky Mountain National Park for several weeks when the onset of true winter forced him out of it. Wandering without a map, he came across a side trail that emerged from the woods at the loop less than half a mile from 1060 Technology Lane, and its loading doors which were unwisely left unsecured. Geiger, who had three battery convictions on his record, had realized the fourth floor had possibilities as a temporary shelter as long as he could stay hidden. The police found traces of his pathetic existence up there in different rooms. Geiger confessed that at about 3:30 p.m. on December 4, about five hours before I entered the building, he'd been surprised by a construction worker named Richard Osbie, who'd been bringing materials up the freight elevator. Perceiving Osbie was going to call the police, Geiger had knocked him to the floor and stabbed him thirty times.

But the sight of Osbie's body on the conference room carpet, shock that it was, was not what had caused me to almost lose my mind, even though in the moonlight I had been just able to see the horrible wounds on his chest and neck, and the way his face was entirely masked by a thick layer of blood. It looked like he'd bought a cheap devil's face from a costume shop.

No, I had fled down the hallway because standing over that man's corpse was a man in a short-sleeved white shirt, tie, and dark slacks. He had a small to medium build, and was mostly bald. He was looking directly at me.

That's the part, of course, that I replay in my mind the most. I never reported that sight to the police when we arrived at the site of the killing, because even before I'd left the gas station to return to 1060 and meet them, I knew that they'd never find any businessman up there, or anywhere else on Technology Lane. I knew what I'd seen was not a living entity, because in the dark I should not have been able to see so much of his eyes, but somehow I did. They were empty of all life, hope, humanity, awareness, consciousness, understanding. They were completely dead.

During his confession, Geiger was asked why he didn't pursue me through the door up there, why he had stopped. His answer was that he thought someone was behind him, but he never said more.

As for the bear... there was no evidence that there ever was one, except for what I heard and what I sensed and smelled. I've listened to many recordings of black bear vocalizations in the wild since then, trying to make the connection in my memory, and I've come to this conclusion: there is little other possibility that a bear is what I had heard. My wife, the only person in the world I've told the whole story to, including what I truly saw in the conference room, woke me up in the middle of the night a week after my revelations to her, sat up in bed, and said maybe there were *two* ghosts that night—and one of them was only there to push me toward the fourth floor.

I never went back to work at Nordhagen. I cynically used this incident to bow out of being an office drone for them. But today, which is an overcast winter Sunday, while here in Denver to conduct a training seminar, I drove back to Technology Lane, getting there at just past four in the afternoon. Nothing's really changed, though the renovations in building 1060 were of course completed almost two decades ago. You can still take the trail toward Rocky Mountain National Park from just beyond the parking lot of building 1024. The looming top edge of *my* building still looked eerie to me against the cold white sky.

The building directory outside finally lists a fourth floor tenant, one of the bigger web security companies in Colorado. And as I found out recently when reconnecting with my old friend Billy Shell online, people at Nordhagen are still collecting tales. Mine is one, naturally.

There's one more person I'm going to reveal everything to, I think—*everything* I saw in the conference room, not just the body of Richard Osbie. I'm getting together for a drink with Billy tonight (he's still in the area but works for Sage Hospitality now), and I want to propose a swap to him. *Tell me what happened to your father in the nineteen-thirties, I'll say, and I'll give you some interesting information from that night in December of 1999.* Maybe even the fact that there was a wide, inch-deep bed of snow around that businessman's feet, and that Richard Osbie lay nestled in it, something else the police never saw nor were aware of.

Let two white collar drones give each other something to think about during our long days of spreadsheets and performance reviews and team huddles. I haven't seen Billy since the Friday before my night of terror, but I know from talking to him on the phone that he's the same. He always needed to relate these stories, needed to believe in them. And I know he'll order a drink for us both, look at me with amused but knowing eyes, and say:

Listen now...

dusk

I just got back from the Catoctin Mountains. They're about ninety minutes northwest of my apartment here, just outside of Washington DC. It was a very hastily improvised road trip. I had been out walking in the Antietam battlefields for a while and I thought, well, maybe I can just squeeze in a hike today before I go home. So I jumped in the car and headed out to Catoctin Mountain Park.

When I got there, I drove about a mile into the forest to a very small parking lot, got out, and started to hike one of the main artery trails. It was about 3:30 by then, and I didn't have a lot of time to explore. You do not want to get caught anywhere near dark that deep in the woods; that can get very ugly. The weather had been cold all day; kind of wet, gray, and windy. I didn't see any other hikers, which made sense. I figured what I'd do is go straight down the main trail, do a simple linear walk, then head back right at the forty minute mark. That would give me time to get back to my car and leave safely.

I was walking for about ten minutes when I did finally see other hikers. It was a group of seven or eight of them together, coming the opposite way. I noted that not one of them was under, say, fifty, and that they were dressed in street clothes, not especially conducive to a hike. An odd thing that struck me was that two of them were holding infants in swaddling clothes, cradling them to their chests very carefully and delicately.

Maybe this actually wasn't really that strange, because that close to Pennsylvania, you'll sometimes see Amish or Mennonites who'll come down and hike on the weekends in the mountains with their families. They always have children with them of all ages. So their group was a little bit odd, maybe, but not terribly so. They didn't make any sort of eye contact with me as they passed. I moved off the trail a little bit to let them go by, taking the opportunity to swig some water. I watched them as they went another thirty yards or so and then took a right turn, headed onto a side trail leading deeper into the woods.

My first thought was, well, I hope they understand how much time they have left before it does get dark, cause it happens so quick out here. You don't realize it's coming in so fast. But they seemed to know where they were going, seemed to have a real sense of purpose. They went deeper in the woods while I moved on down the main artery trail.

I never really got warmed up. It was so, so bitter out there. I eventually reached the forty minute mark of the hike, stopped, took another drink of water, and then started to head back, keeping a very close eye on the sky. I still didn't see anybody else out there except for those older people. When I'd returned to the spot where I'd first encountered them, not very far from my car, I saw the group come out of the woods again—right off that side path, just ahead of me, with perfect accidental timing.

It was the same seven or eight people, but this time, something was very different. Those infants were gone. They no longer had those babies clutched to their chests. Both of the children, not there anymore. One of the women had her hand up to her forehead, visibly in distress, leaning against a man I assumed was her husband, walking very slowly. He was leading her out. Expressionless, they took a slow left turn onto the main trail, facing away from me. I stood back, watching them, letting them go, giving them the right of way. They walked on in the general direction of the parking lot, gradually disappearing from view.

It was so odd. I walked forward to the intersection of the main trail and that curious side path, and looked into the woods. I very much wanted to know where they had come from. I assumed the path went to some scenic overlook that I didn't know about. I wasn't sure I had time to explore it—it was getting dark. But I did decide to go, and started down that very, very thin, unmarked trail. It was almost dead straight, with very little variation, no elevation gain or loss. I kept tramping through the woods and about the quarter mile mark, I realized I had simply run out of time. It was getting too dangerous to be exploring. But then the woods did open up.

The path ended at a small, serene, perfectly still black pond, tall reeds all around it. There was not a single ripple in that pond despite the breeze. No sounds of animals in the brush, no nothing. I saw that the moon was already clearly visible in the sky and the light was fading fast.

I couldn't take my eyes off that pond for a while. Finally real consciousness emerged for me again, and I reminded myself I absolutely had to go.

So I turned and began to move back down that skinny path, walking much more swiftly this time. In ten minutes I reached the intersection again. I took a left and made my way back to my car. It was the only one in the parking lot. I swear that when I had first pulled in before dusk, that was also the case.

I started the engine, turned the heat on full blast and drove home. That's where I've been for the last hour and a half. Just thinking about what I saw, and what it all may have meant.

extremity

My name is... well, let's just call me Theodore. On the morning of August 24 of this year, I boarded a plane out of Toronto under an assumed name and flew to Reykjavik, Iceland, and from there on to western Sweden. At 11:30 p.m., after eleven hours on planes, I was in a rental car sixty miles outside Arë Ostersond Airport, headed down a winding country road in search of a small white X painted on a guardrail between two mileage markers. There were few other cars out; I'd left the highway many miles back.

When the X caught my headlights I pulled over onto the shoulder and got out, leaving the engine idling. When I was sure no one else was coming, I reached behind the guardrail and felt around for a packet taped to it. I tore off the tape, got back into the car, and moved on. On a square of paper had been written the location of the next directional indicator; there were three in all. It was in this way that I methodically followed the path to the farmhouse. For the sake of secrecy, which was life and death itself now, no cell phone or even landline communication to the meeting's organizer was permitted.

I got to the farmhouse well after midnight. It lay at the end of a half-mile dirt road and sat on six acres of overgrown meadow. I was the last guest to arrive. Rebecca, Gareth, and of course our host, Clive, were already there. Clive greeted me at the door in his trademark designer brown sweater and necktie, holding a lantern. It would be the only light inside the house for the remainder of the night. I followed him through the shadows into the dining room, where Rebecca and Gareth were waiting and drinking from a bottle of port in acknowledgement of their thirty-ninth and thirty-third birthdays, respectively, which were only a week apart.

Clive set the lantern on the table. The cicadas were noisy that night. Clive wasted little time in asking me to describe for the others what had happened at Castle Leidricht two weeks before. Sitting here tonight and paging through the transcript of that conversation, I believe I was admirably succinct.

THEODORE: We were all exhausted and becoming paranoid. I left them for an hour to go into town to buy more food, at about two in the afternoon.

CLIVE: Which day was this?

THEODORE: The fifth afternoon, Sunday. When I got back, the east door was locked for some reason, and nobody answered my rapping. So I called and called and still got no answer. I decided to climb the east wall into the courtyard. I went in through a side door and nobody answered when I yelled out for them.

I went into the basement, and that's where they were, the three of them, in the subcellar. Standing in a circle. They were all holding swords, and their arms were outstretched so one person was holding the point of his sword against the other person's neck. Pressing so hard, there was already a little blood. But they were standing perfectly still. And before I could even say anything, they all shoved their swords forward, all at the exact same instant. There were huge gouts of blood and they all collapsed. Maybe Hiraku was the first one to die, I don't know.

CLIVE: How sure are you that they weren't making their own decision?

THEODORE: Completely sure. They would have acknowledged me otherwise. Einion had their minds. He wanted one survivor to see them do it. No question.

GARETH: How long did you stay there?

THEODORE: I was out of there in maybe two hours. However long it took to bury the bodies.

CLIVE: You burned them?

THEODORE: Of course.

Rebecca and Gareth asked me some follow-up questions, but Clive had heard it all before. He took out an oversized sketchpad and began to make notes, sometimes holding them up for us to see. With the deaths in Castle Leidricht of three of the most important people in the coven, there were now only twelve of us left in the world. Two of those twelve had been out of contact for several weeks and were quite possibly dead already. Four of the twelve were right here, in the farmhouse., including Rebecca, perhaps the most powerful medium alive.

The number of our enemy was believed to be somewhere between two hundred ten and two hundred twenty. That number had grown since January, while our numbers had gone in the other direction. Killings. Disappearances. Two suicides. The tipping point had been reached. Our odds were now impossible.

Clive had Gareth run down our weapons and surveillance situation, such as it was. Two of our four observation centers had been breached in 2017 and the data had been used against us ever since. With so few resources and so little manpower, there was little Gareth could do about it, and Clive understood. In April, our sole arms provider had been found in a hotel room in Osaka, crushed to death somehow. Whoever had done it had made it happen elsewhere, then taken her body back into the room and left it on the bedspread for discovery.

Clive drew a crude map on the sketchpad and together, over the course of a half hour, we plotted the geographical points of the key people we could still call allies. The coven was irrevocably scattered and would not be able to come together again. It was too dangerous. Even tonight was too dangerous. Clive had brought us here, he explained, to discuss a possible step that now had to be considered.

CLIVE: What do you think Einion will do if he were to start the Convulsion?

REBECCA: I'm hesitant to say because of all we've found out in the last five months. It doesn't feel like enough to make a strong conjecture.

CLIVE: But you have a feeling, and it probably lines up with mine.

REBECCA: I do. It's nothing that can be planned for, or even reacted to, so I think we should focus instead on being pragmatic.

CLIVE: Still, tell me.

REBECCA: I think his first action would be to raise the dead. I say that only because the possibility hadn't existed before now. From where that begins, we could probably narrow down Einion's location, but by then it would be much too late. We'd need a dozen more scouts and another year. The dead will walk all over the earth, and within eighteen months or so, depending on the season he accomplishes this, he'd move on.

CLIVE: Yes, I agree with your theory. And the next step after that?

REBECCA: That's where my understanding breaks down. It would be something worse, but very quickly you reach the end of human comprehension of what he could cause to happen. We can collect information for decades, I can make notes for decades, but in the end it's about the limits of our imaginations. They're hard-coded. I reach a black curtain. You have to be able to go through that curtain to be able to visualize the kind of progression he could set in motion. *We* just can't. There *is* no magic for that.

GARETH: What was that word you used, that term, you one you wrote me about.

REBECCA: Psychic enslavement.

CLIVE: What do you mean by that?

REBECCA: I mean the capacity of humans to suffer unimaginably, but somehow keep living beyond their own physical limits for it. And in doing so, keep feeding Einion's hunger for it.

Clive, a world-ranked bridge player in his younger days when he was married to a movie star, did not allow his face to reveal anything in that moment. He simply told us that we should

adjourn to the living room, where there was more wine. So that's what we did. It was a little past two-thirty a.m. in western Sweden.

We would not be leaving the farmhouse tonight without making a decision, Clive told us, sitting beside the fire and stoking it methodically. He was no longer interested in the logistical considerations of the course of action he wanted to discuss. There was to be an hour of purely philosophical discussion about what the plan truly meant. First, he wanted us to think on all possibilities and scenarios in which Einion might *not* execute his plans. Were there any circumstances that might lead to his end before he had the chance to make the world into his horrible plaything? Could a direct assassination attempt—if he could even be found now—work given what we had left?

But above all other considerations was this: If there truly was a decision to be made, was it our right, the four people in this farmhouse, to make it? Could something so immense be put into the hands of any person, regardless of what humankind might be facing in the months and years to come?

The end of the world. That's what we were talking about. Not as an act of anger or religious crusade or apostasy, but of mercy. An eternity of Einion's rule or the cessation of everything. The euthanization of humanity brought about by four psychics in a farmhouse in Sweden.

We wound up speaking for two hours, not just one. One extra hour of talk before a decision was made.

REBECCA: When I was a little girl, my father took me camping on Lake Erie. And on the way, a fox ran out from the weeds and under the car. Dad swerved and we didn't hear anything, but when I looked in the rearview mirror, the fox was moving across the road much more slowly. Dad said it looked okay, there was nothing to worry about. But he got very quiet. We went another five miles, not saying a word, and then he stopped the car, and we turned back. We both had that image in our minds, of the way it was moving so slow. He got out of the car near the spot, and took his gun, and went looking for it while I sat in the front seat and waited. And I heard the shot. He'd been looking for.... I don't know, almost a half hour.

It was him who taught me that nothing that can feel pain should ever have to endure it, that nothingness was better, and kinder. The scale of that belief was irrelevant to him. And now it's almost thirty years later, but that's exactly what *I* feel. The scale of that belief is irrelevant.

THEODORE: I've already talked out what I feel. There's no need to repeat it. I have no particular affiliation with this world. Or the next one.

CLIVE: That's fine. Thank you.

Looking now at the transcript, I seem to recall it was just about then that I went out onto the back porch of the house to gather my thoughts. It was a screened-in porch looking out on a great expanse of tree-dotted meadow. Over a scruffy line of natural hedge, and a hand-laid stone wall two feet high, lay a smooth open field, and beyond that, the forest. I sat in an old wicker

chair and looked through the faintly rusting screen at the quiet darkness. The sky above us was filled with stars. It was a perfect summer evening for wine, old friends, conversation. I was reminded of my summers with Aunt Stephanie in Maryland when I was a boy, sitting with her cat Moses on the back porch, watching fireflies and reading *Lonesome Dove* and eating Oreos with iced tea, wondering at the mysteries of the world, which had always been there, and always would be. I thought then about the talk Clive and I had had six months before, when he asked me if I was ready to be the first of us to die in the event of true extremity. It had been... divined. I had told him that of course I was.

Clive came onto the porch twenty minutes after I sat down. The others were behind him. It was time to walk to the shed at the far western edge of the property, and examine what lay within. Clive unlatched the little hook on the warped screen door. I followed them out without a word.

Behind us, the six microphones I'd hidden around the house continued to record, conveying digital signals of varying quality to outside parties almost eight miles away. Breaking into the farmhouse four days before had been easy. Pretending I hadn't known the location of our meeting tonight was somehow more difficult. I'd been underestimated once again, and for the last time.

GARETH: I know it's absurd to think about how history might judge mortal acts, but there's something I get stuck on. I find myself thinking: If we do this, if it even *can* be done... in the end, *we* will be the ones who killed hope. The world will come to an end because we would not let hope persist. That's a different kind of human crime. I think it cries out even in a void of space where there's nothing left, no intelligence, no memory, no spirit. I don't believe in God, but somehow I still imagine an eternity of sorrow, knowing what I had done—not to people, but to the concept of hope.

CLIVE: Thank you. I understand.

REBECCA: I know we're not talking logistics, but we can't avoid the fact of the difficulty of unearthing the Calibric. How could that be done in less than a year, even with what we know?

CLIVE: It's been done.

GARETH: What do you mean?

CLIVE: It's here. The Calibric is here.

REBECCA: Where?

CLIVE: It's on the property.

Apple trees grew alongside the long, curving path the four of us took toward the woods in the soft breeze. Clive walked out in front, holding the lantern low to his waist. As she walked, Rebecca let her left hand drift along the tops of wildflowers. Our feet were silent on the thin line of compacted grass. The unseen insects seemed to taunt us with their chant. The path

wandered past a small empty horse barn. An old tin water can sat in its center on packed dirt. As I walked, I looked up toward the high ridge beyond the adjacent field, thinking I had glimpsed movement. I assumed the parties who would be arriving unexpectedly would come from that direction. But the motion was only a heron flying very, very low across the grass toward a nearby lake.

We crossed the divide between the open country and the forest, where there was no more path. Clive lifted the lantern higher to guide us, stepping around trees and over a fallen one that had tried to block our way. The shed loomed up ahead, an abandoned thing made from local pine, probably decades old. Its single door had been propped open with a cinder block.

Clive went in and set the lantern on a high shelf, where it struggled to help us. Inside, there was just enough room for all of us to stand around a large trap door in the center of the floorboards, one with a stout iron ring and a padlock so new its edges still glittered sharply in the lamplight. Clive kneeled and produced a key to unlock the chain. There was a very slight echo as he loosed the chain and pushed away its tendrils. Then he lifted the door.

Gareth stepped closer to me to move out of the way. Clive stood, took the lantern down from the shelf, and lowered it into the hole. He asked for us to assist in pulling the Gore-Tex weather-proof sheet away from the object below, which was elevated by several layers of planks made of birch. A dust cloud billowed up as we did so. I kicked the sheet into one corner.

The Calibric, which so few human eyes had ever seen, lay before us, some of it still hidden beneath the floorboards. It had been crafted from limestone and was almost eight feet long. I would estimate its weight to be between one and two thousand pounds. Its design was so much simpler than I'd imagined, devoid of any ornamentation beyond the small set of Aramaic markings we knew to be on its underside.

The stone cat's body was black and unpolished, rough to the touch. Its head, overly large in proportion to the rest of its body, was partly bowed. Its eyes had been shut from the time of its creation in simulation of eternal sleep. But that, of course, was an irony.

How long has it been here? Gareth asked disbelievingly. Twelve days, Clive told him. There followed details about its excavation from a city five hundred miles from where we'd all believed it to have lain for six centuries; about its transport halfway across the world and then back again; and about the two old men who'd had to be killed to keep its location secret.

There was a moment when Gareth looked at me, and I sensed something different in his eyes, some glimmer of knowledge that something was wrong. His gaze was so direct that I thought he knew something about me was not what he'd known before. But the moment was gone in an instant, and then he merely looked lost, and frightened.

We left the shed and Clive locked it with the Calibric uncovered, conveying the message to us that at least two of us would be back very soon, perhaps as soon as the next day, likely never to emerge again. Dissolving into the Calibric, becoming part of it, might take weeks of dire thirst, hunger, and the total breakdown of mind. And then... maybe the plan would work, executed by very different forms of ourselves, from a world neither here nor beyond. The end of everything. Earth, cracked in a dozen pieces by the force of our will. Earth only a geological memory possessed by the stars above and below it. Our act of mercy complete.

We didn't speak as we made our way back down the path. I trailed a few steps behind. A pre-dawn wind kicked up. We'd been in the shed far longer than I thought, and it had become close to 4:30.

When Rebecca stopped and turned back to me, there was no mystery in what she was seeing now, like there had been with Gareth. She knew. She had felt it, felt a change in the air. The energy of my body told her the truth. Clive heard her footsteps and mine both cease and he turned back, but it was too late. Rebecca had no words, and I offered none in my defense. I'd known Rebecca for seven years; had wanted, long ago, to marry her. All that was gone now. She was looking at a stranger. The expression on her face was clear even in the dark. There was such simple and innocent pain there, like I was a schoolyard friend who had suddenly called her a name.

Twenty yards up ahead on the path between the apple trees stood a gray horse. On the horse sat a woman with long dark hair, someone I'd never met, though I knew her name well. Einion had not sent an army to kill my friends, as I had expected he would, armed men creeping through fields and hedges to do what needed to be done. He'd sent Ethne on a single gray horse, and in a way that was far more terrible.

She offered no greeting, and Clive, upon recognizing her, chose to remain silent. I think he was still mentally processing Ethne's appearance and thus became momentarily irresolute about how to fight her. She wasted not a moment in striking them.

I had never actually seen Einion's strain of magic at work. I meant to close my eyes before it struck, but I never got the chance. The force of Ethne's first and only blow encircled me and froze me. It felt like a blast of heat from a coal oven, and then I was powerless, yet protected. The colors in the trees, the field, the sky, Rebecca's scarlet blouse; all those colors were sucked away. Everything went black and white. And strangely, everything became, for me, trapped inside the magic as I was, a series of grainy still photographs taken from my perspective on the path. I understand now these were my mind's defense against the awful, indelible imagery of the moment. Instead of burning a bloody color documentary into my memory, my brain altered the murder sequence into a completely soundless and monochromatic scrapbook.

In the first image, Clive's arms had been separated from his body, and his head was many feet above his neck, turned sideways in its upwards arc. In the second image, Gareth's upper torso was no longer connected to his lower one. His legs were lying on the path. In the third, Rebecca was frozen just a couple of feet in front of me, and she was looking at the ends of her arms, her mouth wide open in horror, because her hands weren't there anymore. One of them was quite high above her, her ring and middle fingers oddly fused.

Subsequent images followed the course of their lost body parts. Some of Gareth went further down the path, some of him went backwards. A new freeze frame, somewhat blurry, showed me that Clive's head was now just a smudge against the sky, as it finally began to fall. I saw an arm, I'm not sure whose, stuck in the branch of a tree. The last mental photograph showed my own arms in the frame, intact, connected, but covered in the blood of the three people who had been so swiftly and elaborately fragmented.

Then the colors came rushing back to me, and motion resumed. I heard the cicadas again, shrieking so musically. I saw the moon high above. Ethne, beautiful but so very terrible, was waiting for me.

I approached her, and with each step I became more afraid for my life. The word *trust* had no meaning anymore and I had no way to defend myself against what I had allied myself with.

Something wasn't right. She wasn't moving. Only when I got a few feet away from her did I see that in his own last extremity, Clive had been able to lash out with crude effectiveness. Ethne's head was black, misshapen, and greatly reduced, as if slowly sanded away. The same was true of her hands on the stationary horse's reins. When the breeze drifted past, flakes of something rose into the air and tapped my face gently before falling to the grass. It was ash.

Ethne's corpse remained upright for another moment, and then her weight toppled over. She struck the ground like a sack of mail.

I began to walk back toward the farmhouse. The gray horse watched me, impassive, perhaps intent on staying beside its master forever in the dark.

I entered the farmhouse again and went about the process of collecting the recording devices I'd planted. I brought them out in two trips back to my car, put them into the trunk, got in and drove off the property. I had just become a far more minor player in Einion's plans than I'd been two hours before, and I would simply await further instruction. That was all right. I never wanted to be important, something Clive in his immense wisdom had never understood.

The night after what happened at the farmhouse, I archived the recordings and created a transcript from them. I went to bed late and dreamed of a fox curled up asleep on top of the weathered floorboards inside the shed, its soft little chest rising and falling. It awoke in time to dart nimbly out of that place before torches were thrown into it, and a dozen heartless men began the grueling autumn and winter's work of leaching the power of what lay within.

The Lockbox

A scholar speaks on a tape recording full of hiss and scratch, as if it has been recorded very crudely, surreptitiously.

SCHOLAR

This is the book, this is the Sixth Dictionary of Occult Manifestation. Only four copies exist in the world today. This one was stolen from the University of Heidelberg about ten years after it was printed, in 1832. I could go to jail for this obviously, which is another reason you're not recording this and I'm not using my name. And I can't answer any questions about where this came from. Good?

The phenomenon that Ms. Hershbergen is talking about has only been referenced one time in print, and it's in here. The terminology is archaic, so of course the term "lockbox" is nowhere in here. Again, we're just starting here. I want you to see the grounding.

There is the sound of church bells tolling. We hear Ellen Hershbergen outside on a summer day.

ELLEN

I was just driving by and I saw this place, all alone here on this little road, with the garden here. They were having a spring Fun Fair. And I just had this feeling that it was where I wanted to be. I'd move here and I'd attend this church and I'd work for it, and that's all I really wanted. It was just a feeling. So that's exactly what I did.

NARRATOR

At the age of forty-five, Ellen Hershbergen moved alone from Buffalo to the small town of Pontiac, New York. In April of 2013 she found a job at a Hallmark store ten miles away and rented a tiny fixer-upper beside the woods. She settled into a simple routine of work and church activities. In May, she received a call from a cousin she barely knew, asking for her help.

ELLEN

Donna said to me, We just can't take care of Winthrop anymore. He needs a place to stay and get settled, and Pontiac is perfect because he's going to have a job at the sheet metal plant, it's all arranged. I'd never even met Winthrop but she sent me a couple of photographs. She said he was a good man, but he'd had some trouble in the army, and used to drink but he didn't anymore. For a long time he'd been sort of moving between family members out there in Elmira. So what could I say? I said yes, he should come live in the spare room for a couple of months until he had the money to get a place in Angola.

I didn't really think that much about it. It's what I thought family should do. I didn't go deeply into his past.

MARY KOHLMAN

I've lived here... I don't know, twenty-eight years or so. There's really nothing to do here. You have to go up to Angola to even get to a bar, and if you want to drink at a bar that isn't hooked to a bowling alley, you need a plan.

ELLEN

I picked him up at the bus station, and he was just so quiet. He was very small and bald, but kind of muscular. It was very, very hard to have a conversation with him, but he was never rude. He didn't really have any money, or any friends that he kept up with. He was all alone. He watched a lot of TV during the day. He had to wait until his job started in a couple of weeks. Mealtime was very quiet.

He started going out late at night, just walking. He couldn't drive a car, we were going to have to get his license reinstated. I would wake up and look at the ceiling, and I sensed that he was still out somewhere, but I never wanted to ask where that someplace was. He didn't have any real options in town. I think in the beginning he just walked as far as he could, then came back. I would hear the door open at three, four a.m. He stayed in the tub a lot too; he would go in there and stay there for hours. And I thought, He just doesn't want to get out, because there's nothing outside of it for him.

FATHER DORR

Ellen was an immense help to us from the day she first came to us. She had a very good sense for raising money for the church, frankly. But really, I would say she was the most devoted parishioner we had. Absolutely tireless.

ELLEN (*outside again, in the woods*)

On a Saturday after work I walked down here, along the path that leads from the house through the woods into the creek. I hadn't been on it for a while, and you can still see what was done to the bamboo patch here. I know it's horsetail, but I'll always think of it as bamboo. You see how every single stalk was broken at the midpoint, hundreds of them. And then some of the smaller trees were chopped down. This one here... this one here...

No reason; the wood wasn't taken away or anything. It just looked like rage to me.

Now she is back indoors.

ELLEN

I would ask him those first two weeks if he wanted to come to church with me, but he would say no. He was so withdrawn, just watching TV and sleeping. Didn't want to talk about the things he liked, or about the family even, unless you really phrased things carefully. He had such a faraway, lost look in his eyes.

One day he finally did come; this was after the sheet metal plant called and said he couldn't start until August. But he stayed in the car. He rode with me to church, but then he wanted to stay in the car. I was sitting in the service and in the middle of it I looked off out the window for a second, it was a beautiful sunny day. And I could see the car, and Winthrop got out of it, and he was walking over to a stump, kind of near the entrance to the cemetery. There was a squirrel sitting on top of it, cowering. Its eyes were open but my impression was that it was really sick. And Winthrop went up to it very, very carefully, one little step at a time, and he lifted it up in his hands very gently, and he walked away.

He wasn't there when services let out, so I waited for a while, but I didn't see him again until almost dinnertime. He'd walked the squirrel all the way to the hospital, four miles. But that was a regular hospital, and someone there had been good enough to drive the squirrel to the vet's, which had been so much closer.

DENISE MINOTKA

I woke up because I heard the porch creak. The boards are really ancient and my bedroom is right near it. I don't even know what time it was, but I think it was after two or three. Still totally dark. And I got up and looked out, and I swear my heart almost stopped because there was a man just standing there on the porch, at the top of the steps, looking at me through the window, but not even caring. He looked like a salesman out there, but he didn't make any move to leave. So I poked my head out and yelled at him, and he turned real slow, didn't say a word, and walked across the yard and into the woods. But yeah, I knew who it was, I saw his face. And I called Ellen about it and she was real sorry. I was like, "What do you think he was doing there?" and she didn't know.

We all knew there was something really strange about him, we just weren't sure what. But finding him on my porch a mile away from where he lived—that was really terrifying.

ELLEN

That was Denise, who lived about a mile away. In the other direction, further down, that's where Vonna lived.

Vonna had been there long before I got here. She started coming over in July, mostly on her bike. The first time she came over, she'd been in the hospital for most of the day. She told me everything about her life, every possible thing, about all her health problems. She was on disability for a back injury, and migraines, and Lyme disease. You could recognize her from her hair, she liked to keep it almost down to her waist. She once told me she got it caught in her bicycle chain and broke a bone in her neck.

At first she was friendly, but it felt like there was something beneath it. Like she was challenging me sometimes. Sometimes she wanted to stay over even though her house was only a mile and a half away, and she couldn't get to sleep unless she slept in my bed. Then she would spend a good part of the next morning there before going home.

Sometimes I was wary of her because she was the kind of person who always seemed to be on the verge of asking for money, or some other favor. Or I was just scared of her telling me things that I didn't want to know: intimate things about her past and her family, and her father, who had abused her. But she never quite did. There were episodes where she was obviously making fun of me because I wasn't educated, but she had less school than I even did.

She really hated Winthrop from the beginning, and she was always telling me how dangerous he seemed. The mood between them was very tense. He never really even spoke to her. I don't know what they were like when I went off to work and Vonna would stay in the house for a while with him. I can't imagine it. She warned me that he was a lot like a couple of boyfriends she'd had, capable of terrible things. And she was always saying how he obviously wanted her, but she wouldn't have any of that. She said that about almost all the men she knew.

DETECTIVE ART BRANDT

Ms. Minter's record wasn't much more than a series of petty thefts and altercations, dating back to when she was a teenager. Five arrests in twenty years. She did have one far more unusual incident, involving the possible false imprisonment of two young members of the Mormon Church. They had been going around the neighborhood, as they do, you know, in their shirts and ties, door-to-door... and she had allegedly locked these two men in her basement for almost twelve hours and had attempted to get them to perform sexual acts on her. That would have been a very serious charge, but the D.A. couldn't get the church to really cooperate, so it slipped through the cracks.

ELLEN

She would say that Winthrop had guns, but I didn't think that was true. She would say he was breaking into houses at night, but she had no evidence. It was enough to make me more afraid of both of them. But unlike Vonna, Winthrop's situation broke my heart. He'd been passed around the family for such a long time, for years and years, and it felt like no one wanted to know him or understand him. He was just a ball, a ball with no air in it, that nobody wanted to play with.

I hadn't heard from Vonna in about a week, which was strange enough. But she had borrowed my space heater and I really needed it back; the shelter had a use for it. She didn't have a phone, so as soon as I got home from work I walked down the road to her house. Winthrop was in his

room, but I didn't know where he'd been. When I asked him how his day was, he only said that he'd fixed the mailbox. It had kept almost tipping over. It was eight-fifteen or thereabouts.

I'd never been over to Vonna's. She lived on a couple of acres, like I did, like a lot of people in Pontiac did. So much space. The yard was really overgrown. Winthrop had made a little money doing mowing around town, but he never offered to go to Vonna's.

I remember walking around the corner of the house when she didn't answer my knock, and the sun was right there, low behind the woods, just blood red, and big, going down, it looked so close. It was going behind the shed, which I noticed for the first time. I figured if she didn't answer, I would check it out and maybe the space heater would be in there and I could just take it. Everything was very quiet.

I did wind up having to go to the shed. I slid the door open and I looked inside. I slipped into a strange state when I saw what I saw. I guess I became... unhinged. I remember that I walked out... and I had my hands up and out toward the sun, and I walked right towards it, like I was *reaching* for it, as if it could... pull me away from what I saw. I went down on my knees and I almost passed out, but I held on and after a few minutes, things got clearer. I started running down the road.

ARCHIVE RECORDING, TV ANNOUNCER

Police in Erie County are investigating the suspicious death of Vonna Minter, a resident of Pontiac, who was found in her woodshed by a neighbor early yesterday evening. The forty-four-year old woman had been savagely beaten and left sitting upright in a wicker chair. No arrests have been made, and now this small, quiet town is terrified that there might be a killer in their midst.

DETECTIVE BRANDT

The cause of death was blunt force trauma to the head and neck, three blows in all. Based on lividity, it had occurred about sixteen hours before the body was discovered, sometime around three in the morning. There wasn't much to go on from a physical evidence perspective. No weapon was found. The floorboards in the shed were very dirty, which we hoped would have given us a footprint, but what we found was kind of a muddled swirl of activity in the dust there, leading us to believe there had been a short struggle; it had taken place right there. So many of the prints were smeared and undefined that we thought it was possible the assailant had only been wearing socks. There were some fibers found, but they matched such a generic type of sock, the kind that was sold all over the state, that they didn't help to identify anyone.

ELLEN

They came to talk to Winthrop a couple of days after it happened. He hadn't reacted much to it at all, when I told him what I'd found. He just had this quizzical look on his face, like he couldn't process the information. He asked me why anyone would want to do that to her. I said I had no idea. Then he shook his head, over and over again, and went out to walk to the store for some things we needed.

I think it was just a routine thing, them coming to talk to Winthrop, because I'd had to tell them he knew her too, and I had described his situation. They'd found out his time in the army had been rough; he'd had a lot of fights there and had been given a kind of discharge that wasn't honorable but wasn't quite *dishonorable*. When they found out from Denise about the time he went to her porch, they came back and took him in to question him a second time.

He didn't have too much of an alibi for the night Vonna was killed. I wasn't of much help there. The next thing I knew, he was being charged.

DETECTIVE BRANDT

Under questioning, the man was very calm, almost unusually so, but very, very vague in his responses, even about how he felt about Ms. Minter. He told us he might have been sleeping that night, but he couldn't remember all of it. He also didn't have any real explanation for why he'd gone to Denise Minotka's house. What was obvious was that he had been out night after night, and he didn't even give the excuse of "Well, I have insomnia." He couldn't really say why he went on these marathon walks, other than he felt uncomfortable indoors and his sleep had been affected by a lot of dreams about an accident he'd suffered in the army, which had given him third degree burns all up his left leg.

In the end, it was one very minor, in my view, piece of evidence that seemed to tip the scales toward the D.A. deciding to prosecute, other than a fairly distant incident in his army record where he'd very badly beaten someone in a bar fight. We had found, when we searched his room at Ms. Hershbergen's house, an oven mitt stuck in a drawer. A perfectly harmless thing, but one of our officers, Trey Bailey, had very observantly noticed that it was the second half of a pair, the other of which he had noticed in Ms. Minter's kitchen. The wear patterns on both of them were the same. Mr. Engel had denied ever setting foot in that house, so why he was in possession of this item seemed troubling.

ELLEN

I never even knew about the oven mitt until it was brought up at the trial. I didn't get to talk to him much at all because we couldn't raise bail, so he stayed in jail, which I think is what he wanted anyway. He was given a public defender. And I could have told them that maybe it had been part of a box of loose kitchen things she'd dropped off when I wanted to plan a yard sale a month before. I just didn't know. I didn't recall ever seeing it, but that doesn't mean it wasn't in there. And maybe Winthrop took it, who knows. He was a collector of things, little things here and there that didn't have much meaning. We didn't talk about that kind of thing when I came to see him.

Sounds of a prison block.

NAN CARLOS, DEFENSE ATTORNEY

I remember thinking fairly quickly that there must have been a little desperation on the part of the prosecution, because so much of the evidence was very, very circumstantial. And I thought, I can win this case. I can win it if there's any sort of overreach. And I would say that overreach was actually absurd. Even from the opening argument, which depicted Mr. Engel as this twisted killer, this night-stalking fiend, practicing his movements in the dark before picking his first victim... when there was every chance that Vonna Minter's relationships with any number of men from the past pointed to any number of other possibilities.

ELLEN

He asked me to stay away while he was in jail—not in a mean way. I sent him things. He never responded. I went every day of the trial. My boss let me rearrange my schedule, though sometimes I had to leave well before the end of the day, so there were some things that happened in court that I never knew about, I'm sure.

I remember thinking how peaceful Winthrop looked sometimes. Not interested at all in what was going on around him, but sort of... grateful almost that he didn't have any choices to make. He could just show up and sit for hours and not think about his life.

No one else from the family came, except for maybe once.

NAN CARLOS

I think Ms. Minotka was incredibly powerful; it was one of those show-stopping moments that you fear in a trial if you're on the wrong side. Her face and her voice when she described her terror at finding this man on her porch, for no reason, really came through, as if she were describing a murder or some other terrible act that had already happened. The adjectives she used, her pauses, it was all so vivid, and worse still, it was totally honest. I really had some work to do before she left the stand, and I'm not sure how well I did. That was a tough day.

DETECTIVE BRANDT

From the force of the blows, it seemed that the assailant was certainly very strong, unusually so. There was a lot of overkill in what he or she did, even though it was just three blows that could be proven. My gut was telling me that a man as passive as the one we arrested would not have gone over the top like that, but his past did tell us different. And I have learned that almost anyone is capable of it.

MARY KOHLMAN

You could sort of tell by listening to people talk around here that everyone was focused on this one guy, but I was like, "Jesus, I *hope* they got the right guy, because if it's *not* him that did this, you all are a bunch of fools for staying out late at night."

ELLEN

This was about a week before the trial started. I woke up sometime after midnight, I'd been having a lot of trouble sleeping. My habit was to get up and get a glass of weak tea and then go back to bed. I usually didn't even turn on the lights but this time I did, just for a minute, and turned them back off again. When I got back to my bedroom I looked out and I saw my car out there. I didn't have a driveway, it just sat in the grass. And there was a shape behind it, next to the rear wheel. Something bulky there, really low, in the dark. I couldn't figure out what it was, but I was scared to even get closer to the window. It was too big to be an animal.

And then it moved, just a little. I sat back down on my bed because I was afraid to keep looking. I was trying to remember if the back door was locked, trying to visualize myself locking it, and when I would have done that. Finally I looked out again.

It was gone, whatever it was. But I never got back to sleep. I had to call in late to work. Every sound out there in the woods from then on was threatening to me.

NAN CARLOS

I've seen so many times a case start to veer off the rails in court because of the presentation of blood evidence. It can get so detailed and so murky that you simply lose the jury's attention, and I think that started to happen. The prosecutor was so intent on establishing the power of the assailant, and the savagery of the attack, through the blood patterns in the shed, that he felt he had to go *back* and repeat that same theme all over again when I challenged the veracity of

two of the samples, and brought up again how there was nothing else in existence with the victim's blood on it that could be connected to Mr. Engel.

What you can see happen with blood or fiber evidence is this endless back-and-forth battle of experts, and discrediting, and conjectures being raised and shot down, and in the end the jury's eyes glaze over and they just get confused as to what the original point was, or if anyone knows exactly what they're doing.

ELLEN

I was sitting in the courtroom and I started having this memory of doing the laundry, sometime before Winthrop was arrested but after, I think, they had come to talk to him the first time. See, I would always do the laundry for both of us. And in there in the pile one day was one of his shirts, he only had about four, this green shirt with the logo of a brewery on it. It was all twisted up and a little damp, like it had been gone through the washer already. But I don't think he'd ever used the machine before.

When I get home from court I laid down and I prayed. I prayed that I misunderstood.

ARCHIVE RECORDING OF TV NEWS REPORTER

The trial of Winthrop Engel for the murder of Pontiac resident Vonna Minter ended today in a hung jury. After three days of deliberations, no definite verdict could be reached, and so Mr. Engel will go free after a twenty-two-day trial. Prosecutors did not comment on whether he might be tried again at a later date before a new jury. Public defense attorney Nan Carlos said she would have preferred to see a full acquittal.

NAN CARLOS (*on television, on the courthouse steps*)

We don't feel the state had *any* specific evidence against Mr. Engel, and you saw whatever guesses they *did* have completely fall apart in the courtroom. I don't know where they got the confidence in their case, because it certainly didn't come from any known facts.

ELLEN

He had to go through a day of processing procedures before he was released, and so I told him I would come back for him to pick him up the next night if he called me, but it got very late and I fell asleep. He got a ride from the police.

When I heard him coming in, I couldn't bring myself to get up. I didn't know how to react, really, so I pretended I never heard him come in. I needed some time. I needed to sleep, and maybe when I woke up I would have a better idea of what to do next. Because I *was* afraid, I was finally afraid to be around him.

But when I woke up he was gone. He'd taken almost nothing with him. He'd left a note telling me that he thought it was better if he went to live somewhere else, and he'd gone. With no money.

The guilt I felt over that was terrible. I took his note to mean he sensed how I felt somehow, like I hadn't been able to hide it as well as I thought. If he was innocent, then what a tragedy that was, that the only person who would take him in had slowly become so cold.

NARRATOR

Frightened of staying in her remote house alone, Ellen moved a month after the verdict to a small apartment in Silver Creek, fifteen miles away. She was not contacted again by Winthrop. There had been no additional murders in the Pontiac area after his arrest.

ELLEN

I suppose because I'm not educated I have very simple ideas about life, and especially the bad things that can happen to people. So I would imagine that he was out there homeless, dying somewhere of hunger. I doubted the family was helping him. From what I knew of him, I just didn't know how he could manage on his own.

PRIVATE DETECTIVE

She contacted me around mid-November of 2015. This was only six months after I was actually shot by a former client, so I was still on the fence about getting back into this line of work, but what she needed seemed fairly simple, so I said sure, I can help find your relative. It wasn't difficult. She could have done it herself with about three phone calls, but in my experience people like the sense of putting a distance between themselves and something they'd consider—let's use the term "furtive." They like the sense of free will being given over to a professional. It's got a little absolution to it.

ELLEN

They told me he was spending time in a homeless shelter in Clarksburg. That was only about a twenty-minute drive from Pontiac. I wrestled with myself for a few days about whether to go. I knew if I mentioned it to anyone, they would tell me it was a reckless thing to do.

SOCIAL WORKER

I assumed he was nonverbal when he came in, and that he couldn't read and write very well. That was OK, we had no problem with that whatsoever. We're ready for whatever needs someone might have.

ELLEN

I went in, and he was sitting on a bed and looking through an atlas of the world from the little library they'd put together... it was so terrible, so strange, that he wasn't saying anything. He had a note pad with him, and a pencil, and he wrote Hello and he accepted a hug, but when I asked him if something had happened to his voice he just wrote *No, I am very hoarse*, and he wrote it without an "a," so it was just "horse." So I felt very limited in what I could ask him.

I gave him some money, which he took, and I said if he'd like to stay at the motel down the street, I would get a room for him for a couple of nights, and he wrote *Yes*. It was all one word answers. That wasn't anything too different from his usual. It was more his eyes that bothered me. He wasn't looking at me the same way. He would linger on me; I don't think he ever really stopped staring.

I asked him to meet me in a couple of days when his throat was a little better. I looked out the window and I saw a McDonald's there across the street, and I told him to meet me there on Friday at eight o'clock, after he had left the motel, and we would talk some more. He nodded

and then I left. I thought that something had happened to him that he wasn't telling me. This wasn't the same person that had lived with me.

I drove back when I was supposed to, on Friday night, and he was already there, waiting for me in a booth in the corner. We were pretty much alone, it was cold out. He still had the pad though. I asked him if he was OK, if he'd seen a doctor. But he didn't answer that. All he'd done was write a sentence on the pad, and he pointed to it. It said *Where does Grace Beck live?*

I had no idea who that was and I told him so. But he just pointed to it again. He still had his gloves on, he wouldn't take them off. Then it got to a point where he wasn't answering anything I asked, he just tapped the pad over and over and kept looking at me in a way he had never looked at me before. This just wasn't the same person.

I left him sitting there, and I got in my car, and I saw him go out through the other entrance. He started to walk down the road, but not in the direction of the shelter. So I tried to follow him. I couldn't just creep alongside him, that didn't work, so I would drive past and then circle back, and keep doing that, sort of keeping track of his progress down the road. He sat down in a bus shelter and I knew I couldn't follow him further than that.

I was at a stoplight, and when it turned green I would just move on. He was sitting there and he took his gloves off. He still didn't see me. The shelter was one of those that has the fluorescent lights in it. And I saw that his fingernails were painted.

NAN CARLOS

The police had found, when they'd done their evidentiary, a series of letters Vonna Minter had written to an unidentified woman. The letters were incredibly angry and threatening, and they even slipped into a kind of deranged murder fantasy. She was vowing to kill this woman she was writing to and who she'd had an affair with. But the details of who she was were incredibly vague, and none of the letters had been sent. I tried to get them introduced at trial to demonstrate that this opened the door to a potential suspect other than Mr. Engel, but the prosecution pretty efficiently kept them out. Too speculative. Without having any idea who this target of her wrath was, there was no way to find her and question her, so it all collapsed.

GRACE BECK

I was teaching at Genesee Community College, and Vonna was a student. I think she was taking maybe one class other than mine, she wasn't very serious. And she was fairly aggressive in her approach to me, and I was going through some dark things at the time, none of which I'm proud of. The intense part of the relationship lasted maybe a month, and after that, after I sort of... maneuvered out of it, she became unhinged very fast.

ELLEN

There was a knock on my door and a man was standing out there, he was about fifty I'd say, and he said he represented the state of New York, and that there was some money owed to Winthrop, part of some legal settlement from a job he used to have. There weren't a lot of details. But they needed to find him, and I was connected to his last known address. I told them about the shelter and said maybe they could find him there, but I wasn't much help. And he went away.

Something about that man didn't feel right at all. From the second he began talking, it didn't feel right. It didn't seem to me to be the way the state would go about things. The more I thought

about the talk we had there in the doorway, the more frightened I got that I'd been speaking to someone who had a secret, someone who was using me. The fact that he was physically that close to me, this man, was the same feeling I'd gotten from seeing that shape beside my car in the middle of the night, back in Pontiac. Some... threat. He had never given me a card or any contact information.

GRACE BECK (*reading from a printout of an email*)

'Dear Ms. Beck,

You don't know me but I'm sending this email because you might be acquainted with someone I know named Winthrop. He told me two weeks ago that he was looking for someone named Grace Beck, and I worried about this because of some changes to Winthrop's personality. Some people think he could be dangerous. I thought there was a chance he intends to harm this person. I looked up many Grace Becks in the area, but you are the only one who Winthrop might have a connection to. I see on LinkedIn that you were a teacher at Genesee Community College, where a neighbor of mine had some classes. Her name was Vonna. This is the only reason I thought you might be the Grace Beck he was talking about. I'm not sure what other information I can offer you. If you think you might be the right Grace Beck, feel free to write me back and I can try to explain more.

Ellen Hershbergen.'

I got that email in early December.

ELLEN

I let a long time go before the last time I tried to see Winthrop. Too long, probably. The people in the shelter told me he'd left a week before, they had no idea where he'd gone to. So I was reduced to driving around town in the snow. I remember thinking that if it got even the tiniest bit heavy, I wouldn't go out that day. I was at the edge of the parking lot debating it. But I did go. Just driving around, thinking there was only a one in a thousand chance I'd spot him. But it felt like the only way to close things.

GRACE BECK

I got physically afraid for myself when Vonna started distorting some facts about our relationship. She would call my cell and she would call me horrible names, but she would also accidentally call me by an entirely other name sometimes, which was really unsettling. Or she would talk about things I had supposedly told her in Texas, which was a place we'd never been. We had never been there. So I began to really fear her. The attraction to an outlier personality, which I had succumbed to... that turned bad, and maybe some damaged part of me knew all along that it would. But I really wasn't prepared for someone like Vonna.

ELLEN

I didn't think I had it in me to ask some of the other homeless people I saw about him. Winthrop was tough to describe. It was the painted fingernails that finally reminded someone of him. The guy was maybe twenty years old, a very nice young black guy who seemed out of place there on the street. He was so polite, more like a student. But he was homeless too, and he told me to check out a park nearby. Some people slept there and he thought Winthrop might too. He didn't know his name, but he knew about the fingernails. The man he'd talked to, just one time, could speak though, so I thought maybe he was mistaken.

I went to the park. It was very big, and woodsy. The only way you could see it all was by going down a trail that went through the woods. So I walked. It was very cold. And I came out at this field that was separated from me by a creek.

Now outdoors, walking.

ELLEN

I was standing right here, about half a football field away from the creek over there... and was someone standing and watching me on the other side of it. I could see his face, and it was Winthrop. But he was wearing a dress, an old one, and he was also wearing a wig. I started to walk toward him, and he shouted at me from where he was. He said *Stay back, bitch, or I'll kill you too.*

I turned and started to walk back in this direction. I was already crying. And I heard him yell at me to find Grace Beck and bring her here.

I ran then.

NAN CARLOS

In one of the letters threatening this anonymous woman, Ms. Minter had talked about how first she would practice on her neighbor, by which she very obviously meant killing her. She was very specific about the means: She would strangle her as she slept. She could have meant one of several people, but my first thought was that she was talking about Ellen Hershbergen. She didn't date the letters, but you could see that there was an escalation happening, and that Ms. Minter's rage seemed to reach its height very shortly before her own murder. Something was about to happen.

She finally wrote why she wasn't sending these letters. She intended to leave them all on her anonymous ex-lover's body, after she had dismembered her.

MIKE GREEN, PROSECUTOR

Here we thought we might have the seed of motive, that at some point the accused had somehow gleaned a threat to the woman who was taking care of him, and had been set off. We just did not have enough evidence, and quite frankly I thought it would be too risky to gamble on that one delicate thread.

GRACE BECK

When things were still somewhat in control, and I thought I could... talk her down, as it were, before I had to leave, move from my apartment to try to escape her... there was an incident I still don't understand; I've tried not to think about it. I had confronted Vonna about her lies concerning where she actually lived; it turned out the place I had once visited her was not her house at all. I'd begun to suspect that she might have been squatting in various places without ever really having an address. And in the middle of this argument—I remember we were walking behind an antiques store outside town—she turned to me and said, "You know, no matter what happens, I know how to live forever. I was taught by Port-a-John Man." I said, What are you talking about? She said that ever since she was a little girl, she had dreams of a port-a-john sitting in the middle of a cornfield. Sometimes a man would pop out from behind it and he would tell her how to live forever, he would explain the process to her. So she'd learned it, she said, and even if she died, she wouldn't really be dead.

I became truly afraid of her. Nothing I'd read in my life explained her mind.

ELLEN

I called Grace Beck on the phone. She was very nice. I told her what I could and I tried to make a little sense of it, and I offered to drive out and see her, and she said that was a good idea. She'd had to rearrange her whole life when she got so scared of Vonna; she'd applied for a job somewhere else and moved away.

GRACE BECK

I told her I would meet her at my house at nine o'clock. I had to drive back from the city. I told her that if I was late at all, she should go right into the house and wait, since it would be very cold. I had never locked my back door, but now of course that would have to change. As I got into my car, I found myself fixated on the situation and becoming more and more frightened. And I started to shut down, I began to panic. It was a combination of the memories of Vonna, plus this new threat, this accused murderer who I'd heard about on the news singling me out... it all gave me this horrible unreal feeling of vertigo almost.

ELLEN

I don't have a cell phone, so I waited in her drive. At about a quarter to ten, I got out of my car and went into the house like she'd asked me to, I couldn't keep my engine running for the heat that long. It felt very strange to be alone in there.

Only about ten minutes after I got in there, and sat down in the living room, I heard a dog barking outside. Barking very loud and long, then it stopped. For a second I had a weird thought that it was barking at *me*, a trespasser. I lay back and closed my eyes for just a minute.

GRACE BECK

I realized I'd driven past my exit but I did nothing about it. I kept driving and driving, exit after exit, and I stopped looking at the clock or the gas tank. I just kept going. Each exit that came up, I couldn't bring myself to take it. I was running away. Anywhere was better than home.

ELLEN

Suddenly I heard the back door being pulled on very hard, over and over again. There was no knock, it was just all at once this sound of the wood rattling, like someone was trying to rip it off its hinges. It lasted maybe five seconds. I got up and I went into the hallway. I could see the kitchen from there, and the door. I went to the window. Grace had a big back yard with a floodlight, and I saw two men running toward the house across it, toward the back door. I screamed; I don't know if they heard me or not. But they were already splitting off on both sides of the house. One was going to the left, one was going to the right. No one would have seen them, the house was screened off by trees.

Then I heard something moving on the roof. I backed into the hallway so fast I wasn't watching where I was going and I slammed my hand into the wall and I broke my thumb. I heard something from the front of the house, something hitting the gutter out there. Looking through the living room window I saw one of the men come around the front. He was looking up at the roof and yelling something to the other man. I could tell then that I wasn't the reason they were there. Then whoever was up there on the roof jumped off it. I had some strange burst of bravery and I opened the front door.

These two men were pinning Winthrop to the ground. He was wearing women's clothes.

This van pulled up at the curb, very fast, and they were pulling Winthrop toward it. A woman got out of the front of it, and she came running up to me and she pushed a card into my hand, and told me everything was okay, that I should call the number on the card as soon as they were gone. They forced Winthrop into the back of the van and it closed and they drove away, no headlights on. It had all happened in about thirty seconds.

I was left with this card in my hand. It had a phone number written on it and a first name: *James*. In the dirt near the front door, there was a hatchet. They'd taken it away from Winthrop when they took him down.

We hear a repeat of the scholar speaking on a tape recording full of hiss and scratch, as if it has been recorded very crudely and surreptitiously.

SCHOLAR

This is the book, this is the Sixth Dictionary of Occult Manifestation. Only four copies exist in the world today. This one was stolen from the University of Heidelberg about ten years after it was printed, in 1832. I could go to jail for this obviously, which is another reason you're not recording this and I'm not using my name. And I can't answer any questions about where this came from. Good?

The phenomenon that Ms. Hershbergen is talking about has only been referenced one time in print, and it's in here. The terminology is archaic, so of course the term "lockbox" is nowhere in here. But the case of Catalina Popa is fairly well described, and if you take that case, almost three hundred years old now, and draw a parallel between it and the case of this man Ms. Hershbergen describes, you could do it, it's pretty clear. Again, we're just *starting* here. I want you to see the grounding.

ELLEN

I suppose that if I hadn't had such a traumatic time with the police back when Winthrop was arrested, and during the trial, then I would have thought about calling them first. Of course I would have. Not that they had ever done anything wrong, they had always just been doing their jobs, but I felt safer somehow calling the number on the card first.

The man named James answered and he told me again that Winthrop was very safe, that he was under the observation of a doctor, but also some other people who had his best interests in mind. They wanted to talk to me, because they were aware of who I was and that I had a concern for Winthrop too. He was happy to meet me anyplace I liked, but confidentiality was very important. So I went to the bandstand at the park, and he was waiting for me.

SCHOLAR

I want to try to read this without touching the pages.

“Ms. Popa, a deaf woman prone to visions and hallucinations, took gravely ill in September of 1730 at the home of her father and later disappeared. In spring of 1732, she was found by a cousin being cared for at Pomposa Abbey, Emilia Romagna. Ms. Popa was uncommunicative, yet words issued from her mouth in a whisper every moment she was conscious. It was noted that she was reciting the monologues of more than a dozen individual overlapping personalities. Sentences blurred into one another without meaning. The prelate of Emilia Romagna, Lucio Trentini, after spending days transcribing her words, was asked if the poor wretch should submit to the process of exorcism. He replied, “To the contrary, we must make every effort to keep these demons *inside* of her.”

ELLEN

The first thing James asked me there at the bandstand was if I had noticed something odd about Winthrop’s behavior in the courtroom during his trial, if anything had stood out. And something did occur to me. He would sometimes do this thing where he’d run his hands up his face, feeling the skin. Not like scratching an itch, just compulsively feeling his face, almost exploring it. James said Yes, that is what he and the people he worked with had responded to. They’d read about this behavior on a reporter’s blog and they started to go to the trial every day. They had been sitting near me all along. I was never aware of it, but they were there.

Before James went on talking, he said he wanted me to accept a different way of thinking about the world from that moment on. He said it might be helpful if I imagined I was a character in a movie that was going on all around me, and that I should try to react to any twist like a movie character would, not resisting it. He said that only in that way would I be able to accept the things he needed to tell me, and I could maybe save Winthrop. He made it sound like no one else could. It was me.

SCHOLAR

Imagine a person whose mind and body have been completely hollowed out, either through an accident of birth or abuse, or probably a combination of both—in particular, think of the effects of long-term drug abuse. Heroin, methamphetamine. Imagine all that striking someone whose mind is already malformed. What you get is a kind of empty human shell. In that shell, there can be no spiritual resistance. It represents infinite space for an infinite number of intruding malevolent sprits.

Now, this is not an unfamiliar concept. But what if that shell had a pragmatic use?

ELLEN

He asked me if I was willing to believe Vonna was inside Winthrop, like he did, like the people he worked with did. And I said I didn’t know, but that I’d try. I’d try to be like a movie character, not trying to fight it if it made me safe. He said they needed me to confirm what they suspected, that I was the only one who had been around him enough who could fill in the information they were missing. There were dozens and dozens of questions they had. And if they were able to convince me... would I be willing to accept the process of saving him, even if it was dangerous? I didn’t know that either.

He must have talked to me for two hours. By the end, everything about life was mysterious to me. Even his explanation of who these people were sounded like it was invented. Scholarly people and doctors and religious people, he said, but not priests. He couldn’t say how many there were. Or even where they had come from.

SCHOLAR

A malevolent spirit wants one thing more than causing harm, which is to find a safe, dark place where it can live forever. It has the same survival instincts as we do ourselves, and the same fight-or-flight capacities. It wants to sequester itself away. It's looking for the opportunity, okay?

ELLEN (*driving*)

I think this was the place... it's so tough to tell. I recognized a landmark back at the bridge. But was this the right road? I don't know.

ELLEN

There was a blue house on a hill in the country, about twenty miles away from the park. It even had blue shutters and a blue door, but it looked very old and forgotten. James took me there. He said Winthrop was there too, and I asked him if I could see him. He took my hand and he shook his head very sadly. He said with the way Vonna had tried to get him to change himself, just in the last few hours, it might be too traumatic to see him as he was now.

The woman who had driven the van was there too, and I heard someone moving on a floor above me, and a voice. The questions they asked me were very strange. The point of it was to... I don't know what the word is. To make a baseline. A baseline of Winthrop's physical habits, how I'd seen them. The way he moved, and sat, and ate. They needed to understand how different he'd been from what they were seeing now.

It was very late when they were through talking to me. They still hadn't given me any details on how they intended to treat him. I had this sense that they didn't know how to describe it to me without scaring me very badly.

It went on for hours, felt like. At one point they brought me food, Chinese food that a man I hadn't seen yet had gone out for. Then I was left alone to sleep. James wanted me to sleep, and I slept on a thin bed in an upstairs room.

I had a dream about a fire. The creek going through that field, the creek where I saw Winthrop, was all flames.

James came to wake me. It was almost nine o'clock then. He explained that they only knew of one way to bring Winthrop back. Vonna had to go somewhere else, to another body.

He said there was probably only one person in the whole country who could be that person, who could be that host. Because it couldn't be anyone who could physically harm someone else, and it couldn't be anyone with a mind strong enough to resist her. He was being brought there, that night. There was nothing to do but wait.

FATHER DORR

(*sermonizing inside his church to his congregation, quoting from the Bible*)

"Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

“Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

“So we say with confidence,

The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.

What can mere mortals do to me?”

Let us now sing.

ELLEN

A car pulled up around eleven. I went to the window and looked down at the driveway. It was a van. They were taking someone out of it, lifting a wheelchair down. Because it was so cold, whoever it was, was wrapped in a blanket. But the wind was whipping up and it moved the blanket away for a second, and I saw. I saw as they wheeled him into the porch light.

It was a little boy. He couldn't have been more than nine. I've never seen a little boy who looked so pale. His eyes weren't the eyes of a living person, but he was alive. James came back up from the basement and sat with me, and so did two other people.

SCHOLAR

No one's ever seen what happens when a lockbox is left alone in a room with a possessed person. Whatever happens, it happens only when no eyes are watching. Doesn't matter if it's a human being or a camera. We don't know what kind of confrontation that is. We can't know. The doors close, and then the waiting begins.

ELLEN

They didn't know how many spirits had been drawn into that little boy, but it was at least twenty. They would only tell me that this was the only way he could be.

SCHOLAR

My guess would be that his parents were long gone, and that his body was an absolute void, a wasteland, likely created by an addiction to some very powerful drug, or drugs. And of course the most obvious way he would have become addicted was through the parents, the mother or the father. My guess is that there was only one. Remember what I told you: I've only laid eyes on one person of the kind we're talking about, and she was in a medically induced coma. It was the only thing keeping her alive.

ELLEN

I refused to be taken out of there, though they wanted me to go. They said it might be dangerous. They couldn't know what sort of power the boy contained, what kind of chaos went on inside him that might... erupt someday, or cohere, or maybe the things that were trapped inside him might begin to somehow cooperate with each other. They knew of only four people like him in the world. I said, “Where does he live?” Nobody answered me.

(We briefly hear Father Dorr's parishioners singing a hymn in his tiny rural church.)

ELLEN

All night, while we waited there, in the upstairs room, there wasn't a sound. Except just one time. Around two in the morning, maybe a little before that. I was lying down, and there were two people with me, sitting nearby, just waiting with me. And through the vent you could hear something. Someone was laughing, in a very cruel way, one short burst of laughter. Then it was gone. There was literally not another sound all night from the basement.

Maybe three, three a.m. was when they called for James to go back there. He went, and came back, and he said it was okay if I wanted to go down and see Winthrop.

We went down into this basement. There was absolutely nothing in it but two chairs, facing each other across the room. Winthrop was standing there, looking at me. He said Hello, like he used to, the same way. Whenever he used to say that word, it was like he was trying out what it felt like to be friendly, like he was afraid it might turn against him somehow. That was how he sounded. And he was back, he was Winthrop again. The little boy was gone, but the van was still outside. So he was still there somewhere I couldn't see. There was a door at the edge of the basement. I thought if they took me through it, that's where he'd be. But of course they never did.

Someone took us home. Winthrop looked out the window as we drove. He never really took his eyes off the trees going by, and the farms, and I had a sense then that he would be with me again for a long time, because there really was no other way. I couldn't imagine any other way for him. It was my cross to bear.

FATHER DORR (*in church, to his parishioners*)

This is a woman of profound kindness, a woman who offers her friendship with no conditions. In my experience, some of the most loving people on this earth still set limits on who receives it, and under what circumstances. That's a natural human inclination. I myself can't overcome it.

But she has no wall. Think of how many people you've ever known who have that capacity, in your whole life. Is it two? One? No one?

This is the kindness of saints.

POLICE OFFICER

At about 5:10 a.m. on December 21st, there was a fire call at 108 High Birch Lane. By the time we arrived, the house was pretty well engulfed, no possibility of saving anything. To let you know how bad the damage was, it was a blue house with blue trim and even a blue door, but it was only a month later through forensic analysis that the color could be scientifically determined, so complete was the disintegration, which is very unusual.

We recovered five bodies from the fire, but the cause itself couldn't be determined. The five bodies were all adults, none of whom were found to live in the area. A half mile away was the sixth body, or I should say bodies. This was Reginald Post, age fifty-five, a ramp serviceman for United Airlines, retired, who had been out walking his dog. They were both burned almost to nothing, lying there on the side of the road. Mr. Post was probably killed sometime while the fire at the house was just beginning to take hold.

The only witness who could offer anything was a motorist who saw a small boy walking in the dark from the general direction of the house and along the same general path that Mr. Post took from his own home. We searched for that boy. We hoped he might have seen something. But we never found him.

NARRATOR

In March of 2018, Winthrop Engel left the home of his distant relative Ellen Hershbergen, after more than two years of only intermittent employment, but no arrests and no further incidents with neighbors. He went to live with the family of an old army friend and worked as a small engine mechanic. That Christmas, he made for Ellen a wooden nativity set for her desk, and sent it to her through the mail.

outcall

If I sound exhausted as I speak these words, I've been awake for twenty-four hours now. This morning—I guess I mean *yesterday* morning—I woke up at dawn after maybe three hours of sleep. Somehow I dragged myself to Intro to Theater class, where I didn't hear a word the professor said, and I didn't make it to Econ. In the dining hall I tried to down a hamburger but I had no appetite. I looked at magazines in the campus library. I was just ticking away the hours.

In another attempt to save myself from a hideous mistake, I left campus as the winter sun set and walked a mile and a half to what I jokingly refer to as Alexandria's red light district, down near Odilon Harbor. In the corner of a low-rent office park populated by shady weight loss doctors and bail bondsmen was space 713-B, marked only by a very small acrylic sign bearing the words Lotus Therapy. I turned my face to the tiny camera bolted above me and buzzed in. As usual, Ayaka opened the door for me and forced a vapid smile. She was so self-conscious about her lack of English that sometimes she didn't even say hello. I hesitated when she gestured toward the back. *Go in*, I told myself, *go in, and an hour from now you won't feel that tonight has to happen.*

But I stopped myself. I apologized to Ayaka and shook my head and pointed to my watch to tell Ayaka I hadn't realized the time had gotten away from me. She seemed confused, disappointed. *No today?* she asked. I turned and left quick enough to be rude. God help me, I needed something different that night. It was inevitable.

Back in my cruddy off-campus apartment where I was three weeks late with the rent, I tried to watch TV and not think, but by eight my course was decided.

I got up off the sofa, turned off *Family Guy*, and looked around for something to write on. On the back of a receipt for a BLT and fries from Shmurda's Deli, I drew a big number 4 in black Sharpie. I opened the apartment door, the smell of curry wafting in from down the hall, and taped the receipt to it, number facing out. I closed the door and lay back down on the sofa, face down. I waved the remote blindly at the TV and killed the power.

Time passed. I thought about football and video games and two-for-one pizza nights at the Ironclad.

It was almost eleven when I heard footsteps at the end of the hall, coming up the staircase. Light ones. Heels. I sat up in the dark, listening close. The footsteps reached the top of the stairs and seemed to hesitate. Then they started again. The clicking of those heels approached the door of the apartment I had been sharing with an angry math major who'd flunked out first term. I'm sure my eyes were wide, glassy. The hallway was silent again.

Out there, I sensed the visitor studying the back of that receipt, deliberating. I didn't dare move a muscle. I barely breathed.

After almost a minute, the heels began to move away. I put my fist to my mouth to stifle a cry of anger and misery. The footsteps descended the staircase and faded away for good. Berelyse was gone.

I was crying a little when I wrote a big number 6 on a blank envelope scavenged from the trash and taped it to my door in place of the receipt. I lay back on the sofa, face pressed against an old grape juice stain, my midsection sagging into the busted springs.

Berelyse made me wait till well past midnight before she returned. I knew she'd knock now.

She had blonde hair this time, without me having to ask for it. She had another surprise for me under her raincoat. She walked to the center of the room and turned and opened it to show me, smiling. My mouth dropped open involuntarily and immediately went dry. My heart rate spiked. I moved towards her, but she had turned away.

Six months for tonight, she said in that low, pillowy voice of hers. *A very nice deal for me. I brought you some blank index cards so you don't have to keep writing on box tops and matchbook covers.* I barely heard what she said. I was fixated on her chest.

We went into the bedroom. She told me she had a couple more surprises in store. I had a glass of white wine already poured for her, and a plastic water bottle of Gatorade for myself. Berry flavor. Berelyse closed the door behind me and she proceeded, between 12:50 and 3:05 a.m., to take away six months of my life.

In the dark, afterwards, she did something different than usual. She sat naked in the folding chair I'd scavenged from McFetridge Auditorium with her back to the window so she was just a silhouette, looking at me as I lay there, as exhausted as I've ever been in my life. This was the first time she'd ever simply not gotten up from bed, put her clothes back on, and left me with a sly grin.

I've been hungrier than usual, she said distantly. *I'm not allowed to tell you why. Would you like to see something special I'm allowed to offer you?*

I closed my eyes and reflected on all the numbers I'd already posted on the door of my apartment—those she had refused and those she had accepted. And my predictable plummet into depression and remorse began early.

Come to the window, Berelyse whispered. Come to the window and I'll show you.

I did as I was told. I always had, and I always would. She turned in the chair to look out into the dark as I stepped near her.

My face grew cold as I got close to the window pane; I had to rub the frost away. Outside and three stories below, pothole-scarred Shorter Street ran north and south, lit by a single post on the corner. Across the way was the back of a defunct shopping center, gray service docks lined up, locked dumpsters hunched in the shadows at fifty yard intervals.

On the sidewalk, eight young women stood in a disciplined row, facing my apartment building, looking up at me, their faces murky. In 28-degree weather they were all wearing the skimpy green satin uniforms of the Alexandria University varsity cheerleading squad, pom poms low to their sides.

How much? I asked despairingly. *How much? Just tell me, no games.*

Berelyse stood and put a hand on my shoulder. Her touch at 3:20 a.m., after I had been totally spent and become dehydrated and weak as a kitten, was still like electricity down my spine.

No bargain for that, she said. It would just be the end. Of everything. No more subtraction. Doesn't that sound nice?

It did, and she knew it. The end of loneliness, the end of my awful desires and countless nights not being able to fulfill them, the end of being a one-armed outcast with a terrible stammer in front of girls. She knew I'd agree to almost anything from the moment she had first set her eyes on me that Wednesday night at the Student Union cafe, just like the credit card companies set their sights on the hordes of freshmen who have no money and no financial sense, filling our mailboxes from the day of our first classes with promises of guaranteed acceptance. I could simply say Yes, have the night of nights there in my ant-infested little apartment, and leave this life holding onto some misshapen victory.

I didn't say yes, though, not then. She did not take it well.

I can be mean, too, Berelyse said, her eyes strangely wet and bright. Yeah, it made her face even sexier. She put on the same smile she offered when she sometimes invited me into the shower and said: *It's not just the end of your life I can take months from. I can take them from the middle, too, and you'd never ... ever ... know.*

But of course, I already knew she'd been doing that all along. She had three years now, by my count.

By 3:40 I was alone again, and Berelyse had returned to... wherever it was she returned to. I could either lie awake haunted by the image of the cheerleading team, and Berelyse, and the knowledge that she would never go away, never stop drawing my life from me because of my weakness, or I could walk.

So I walked, hatless and gloveless, my face and hands going beet red quickly. In the cold I crossed Theewen Street and headed down the sidewalk where ghostly feet clad in white tennis shoes had stood, none of them bigger than a size 6. Jesus Christ. I cut through Holy Cross Cemetery as I made my way south. My grandparents were buried there, dead at sixty-six and fifty-seven. My parents were buried there too, dead at sixty-four and fifty-two. From their graves it was about a mile down Layrande Road to the harbor.

I was headed toward the docks when I noticed that, strangely, the cruddy little *Yes, We're Open* sign was still perched in the window of Lotus Therapy at this ungodly hour. I would have put it down to a mistake, but a light was on in there.

I walked up to the door and pressed the buzzer with a numb finger. I had fifty-one dollars left to my name. Just enough for a half hour and nothing illegal. An honest massage, and at least a little true human contact with someone, someone warm and real, before I went to sleep, even someone who only had about twenty words of English. And most importantly, no more terrible decisions to make tonight. No more.

Ayaka answered the door in tight white shorts and an orange t-shirt from Old Navy logo. As she led me in, I asked her when they had begun staying open all the time. She smiled and said, *Tonight, tonight.*

She guided me into room three. No one else seemed to be around. Uncredited new age music floated out from a small CD player. I told her it would just be thirty minutes tonight. *Yes, yes,* she said, gesturing to the table and rotating the dimmer on the wall to set her usual mood.

I took off my clothes and laid down on my stomach. I didn't realize I was crying again until the tears made the towel beneath my head wet.

Ayaka gave me her usual incompetent massage; she was only paid to do one thing well. It took the simple knowledge that I wouldn't be turning over on my back tonight to make it all come crashing in for the first time: how lonely and sad she must be, how used, how helpless and hopeless, how awful a creature I was to keep coming here, spending my last dollars on the most clinical, soulless erotic acts instead of food.

Ayaka's hands were rubbing the base of my neck when I was jolted by the sound of a voice inside the room, speaking strongly in perfect English.

I have an offer to make you, it said, and my eyes flew open. I turned my head and saw Ayaka leaning in above me.

There is an unfortunate competitive element to the state I exist in, she said to me as if she had been born in South Mills or Corapeake. *It's very much in my interest that the "friend" who visits you in your apartment be removed.*

She took her hands from me. I stared at her, blinking idiotically, unable to speak or move.

I will write a number down, she went on. *I can restore this many months to your life if you perform this task for me. I'll of course describe how something like this is accomplished in detail, though you should know it won't be easy. It will be dangerous. You'll have to learn things about us we'd prefer you not know. But I need a human hand.*

Shall I make my offer?

She crossed the room and lifted another small, folded towel from a stack on the dresser. There was a black Sharpie beside it. She uncapped it and wrote a number on the fabric, then placed the towel face down at my feet.

Without another word, Ayaka left the room.

Twelve Tiny Cabins

NARRATOR

If you go for a night hike in summer on the Summoner Trail, you might become confused a half mile from the abandoned town of Del Roy. You might see tiny glittering lights through the forest and think it's a town you're seeing, but it's actually the moonlight on the surface of a lake named after a poet who died by suicide. In summer, that happens.

(Two pairs of footsteps are heard moving through woods, accompanied by labored breathing and loud crickets. Then, one of the pairs of footsteps stops.)

KAT

You need more water?

LEE

No, I just want to check the map, I'm not sure of something. Let me see the flashlight.

KAT

What, what is it?

LEE *(examining the map)*

The shelter was up *here*. See, that dot is the school, that's about four miles to the east. So I'm wondering what *that* is through the trees.

KAT

I don't see anything.

LEE

Little pricks of light, see?

KAT

Okay...

LEE

Let's check it out.

(Their footsteps continue. Dissolve to them progressing in another place, then stopping.)

KAT

Looks like a... camp or something?

LEE

Yeah... the Pokomore shelter is just one big building, not a bunch of cabins, so I don't know what *this* is.

KAT

A couple of the doors are open, look at that.

LEE

What time is it? Like four?

KAT

Just about. So, let's go, I'm tired, I want to camp. We don't have to make it all the way to the shelter.

LEE

Why is there so much light in them at four in the morning?

KAT

They're probably hikers; what are *we* doing out this late?

LEE

There's no one in these, you can feel it. Can't you feel it?

I just want to take a look in one, come on. I wouldn't mind asking someone where the shelter is.

(Much slower footsteps.)

LEE *(calling into a cabin)*

Hello?

(We hear her open a screen door. Her footsteps enter and step onto a wooden floor. Kat follows.)

KAT

Kinda cruddy...

NARRATOR

When the periodical cicada species come out every seven years, the keepers of the Summoner Trail will post an advisory about how loud the insects become at night, and how hikers and

campers who are especially susceptible to stress should be aware of the effect. That summer, they were still two years from appearing.

(The screen door closes again as they leave.)

(Lee and Kat's footsteps trudge over to the next cabin.)

LEE
Hello...? Excuse me....?

KAT
They all went for a night hike or something.

LEE
With their doors open and all their stuff here? Their laptops?

(They enter one more cabin.)

LEE
What are you looking at?

KAT
This candle's about to burn the place down. *(She blows it out.)* How far is it to hike to anyplace they could have left their cars?

LEE
Couple of miles. Look, they just left a bottle of wine spilled.

All right, let's go.

(The door closes.)

(The sounds of many people in a busy hallway.)

NARRATOR
Each September, when the college students head back to class, there's a contest to see who can take the photo of the first evidence of the leaves turning on the Summoner Trail.

(Footsteps approach a door, and someone knocks on it.)

DAVID *(from inside)*
Come in!

(The door opens, and then Lee closes it behind her, drowning out the bustle.)

LEE
Hi, I'm Lee. Berman.

DAVID
David Unseld. Sit!

LEE
Thanks.

DAVID
So the good news is that the department definitely has the hours for you to work if you want them. Mostly it's just scheduling and running around for me and two other professors, but it can all be worked around whatever class load you have. You're getting your masters in Lit... next May, right?

LEE
Yes. Any and all hours would be great.

DAVID
I'll tell you why I recommended you for the job in particular, it's because Barbara White showed me *Stand at the River*. It knocked me over, it really did. That is quite a piece of fiction.

LEE
Oh... thank you.

DAVID
All the research you must have done about the time period really comes through, it all felt completely authentic.

LEE
I started working on that a couple of years ago. A lot of nights at the library.

DAVID
I read *Brothers From Jersey* too, and the poems. Have you thought about the residency program at Blaine?

LEE
I might apply, but I know how hard it is to get into.

DAVID
I will work with you on that. Your portfolio has some amazing stuff in it. I hope this is what you intend to do with your life.

LEE
That's awesome to hear. Yeah, I hope to follow it.

DAVID
When September rolls around, go to the events and the parties the department is attached to, get to know these people socially. So many great writers, and a lot of them will be happy to help.

LEE
I'm not a great schmoozer, but I'm working on it.

DAVID

Cool. Either me or Bill Yarno will call you by Friday with a schedule for July.

LEE

Thanks!

(She gets up from her chair, then stops.)

LEE

I did want to ask you one completely random question.

DAVID

Yep?

LEE

This is going to sound very strange. About a year ago, I was doing a three-day hike with someone out on the Summoner Trail, and about five miles south we came across this weird little set of cabins way off by themselves. We kind of poked our heads in to see what was what because no one seemed to be around. I was getting a bad vibe, and... I saw your name on a manuscript sitting on a desk. I recognized it because I read *Incident at Dinner* my freshman year at Michigan. And when I saw you were teaching fiction here, I thought, You know, if I meet him or take his course, I'm gonna find out what the deal was with that place, if by any chance he was really there.

It's just something out of nowhere that popped into my head—

DAVID

Yeah, yeah, I just.... it's not something I ever expected to hear from anyone. I *was* there.

LEE

Was it a... hiking thing?

DAVID

No. You got a bad vibe?

LEE

Well, it was really late at night, and some of the doors were open, no one was around...

DAVID

I can see that. Um... sorry, Jesus, my mind is stuck. Something did happen there. It's the first time it's come up since then.

LEE

Oh God, and here I go bringing up bad memories.

DAVID

No, it was bound to happen and I've been waiting. Based on the tone of some of the stuff you've written, I think you'd appreciate the story. When we have time, I'll tell it to you.

LEE

Sure, but... you know, if you'd rather forget it, that's cool too.

DAVID

Forgetting about it isn't much of an option, I'm afraid. It's just a matter of how to describe it.

(The sounds of classical music and chatter at a cocktail party.)

NARRATOR

In late October, a two hundred-foot stretch of the trail is lightheartedly declared spooky and decked out colorfully by the nature conservancy, and maintenance money is raised with a Halloween fair for local children and their parents.

DAVID *(approaching Lee from across the room)*

Hey, you finally came to one of these things, awesome.

LEE

Yeah, I figured why not show my face once before I die....

DAVID

How ya feelin'? Like, really young?

LEE

A little.

DAVID

We always invite students to the mixers, but it's tough to get them to come. I mean, listen to this music, what do we expect. It's a Halloween party, for God's sake... *(aside)* Hey Millie. Kevin! *(turning back to Lee)* This is Millie Garr, she teaches Fiction of Eastern Europe at the Beck Center.

MILLIE

Hello.... David sent me some of your work.

LEE

Oh, wow... pleased to meet you.

MILLIE

Brothers From Jersey was lovely. It almost made me like New York again.

(Lee laughs.)

KEVIN

So *this* is the woman who gave me nightmares. I'm Kevin Ronk.

LEE *(laughing)*

Oh, you're Kevin?

KEVIN

OK, Millie, the two you've got to read are called *Slinky Thing* and.... what's the one about the scary children's show?

LEE

Ah, *Princess and the Parrot*.

KEVIN

Oh my God. *Millie*. This woman writes horror like you wouldn't believe.

MILLIE

Yeah, I didn't want to mention *Slinky Thing* first, but oh my, the imagery in that. The cave!

KEVIN

I have to be honest, all I asked David for was more of the scary stuff. Are you working on any more?

LEE

Yeah, a novel actually, so we'll see how that goes.

KEVIN

A novel, a scary novel?

LEE

It could be years away. Scary but with a lot of social history, maybe.

KEVIN

Want to hit us with some details?

DAVID

Whoa whoa whoa... what happened to the outline for the Nebraska novel?

LEE

Well, that's still a possibility, but it's kinda weak right now.

KEVIN

What's the scary one about?

DAVID

You do *not* have to humor this deadbeat.

LEE

No, I don't mind. I wanted to run it by you anyway. It's based on the Herk Dillitch case around 1920.

MILLIE

Oooh, true story?

LEE

Allegedly. This guy named Herk Dillitch killed a whole family of farmers in Cameron Parish in Louisiana, and lived on their property afterward for weeks before they finally found out what happened and got him.

KEVIN

Sounds like the, whatsis, the... Hinterkaifeck case, ever heard of that?

LEE

Yeah, kinda like that. But the really weird part was that a few weeks after Dillitch killed himself in custody, a hurricane hit the area and completely wiped out the cemetery where he was buried. It had been built down in kind of a ravine beside a river. People had to go out and collect bodies from the graves that washed away, they were everywhere. Some of them wound up two miles away. A lot of the bodies had tumbled loose from their coffins. So—

MILLIE

Oh god.

LEE

Right? So a cop went into the living room of this one house; the people who lived there had been forced out of it by the flood—and he found five corpses nearby each other. One of them was Herk Dillitch, and the other four were the members of the family he'd killed.

KEVIN

Ohhhhhh.....

MILLIE

All lying there together?

LEE

Supposedly Dillitch's left hand was actually touching the hem of the dress of one of the victims. There are no photos, though.

KEVIN

If I give you a twenty right now, can you consider that a pre-order?

DAVID

Yeah, she'll get to that one *after* her Nebraska epic. *(to Kevin)* Hey, we need to get up and give that spiel about Tom's award, we're five minutes late.

KEVIN

Oops. We'll be back.

(They depart. Millie and Lee remain.)

MILLIE

Well! Whatever you do next, I'm sure it'll be great. David has this feeling about you.

LEE

He's been really amazing, he practically wrote my application to Blaine for me.

MILLIE

He'll kick down all kinds of doors if he believes in you. *(pause)* He's got kind of a dark side though, I don't know if you've noticed.

LEE

Always seems pretty chipper...

MILLIE

He's gotten into trouble with some of his teaching methods. They can get a little extreme.

LEE

I never actually took a course with him, so I missed out on the craziness.

MILLIE

Never mind me. I need to stop drinking and gossiping.

(The party sounds slowly fade out.)

(Sounds of a coffeehouse. A cell phone rings.)

LEE

Hello?

DAVID *(on the other end of the line)*

Hey, it's David. How was your Christmas?

LEE

Hmmm, not bad. How was yours?

DAVID

I got the time to read the outline for the Herk Dillitch novel. Good stuff!

LEE

I think it probably comes off as more horrific than it'll wind up being.

DAVID

Yeah, it'll be fun to discuss sometime. So... I know money's tight, so if you want to notch a few more hours before you go off to Blaine, with me paying you instead of the school, I had an idea. That thing you mentioned back in summer about your hike last year, and finding those cabins in the woods...

LEE

Yeah, I remember.

DAVID

I've decided it's time to write about it, and I'd like to finally tell someone the whole story if you're still interested. Kind of test it out. This has been weighing on me.

LEE
I'm interested...

DAVID
I'm without wheels at the moment, but I need driving to the spot and to Del Roy this weekend, and for someone to grab some good photos. A friend of mine who was there in the cabins that night wants to swing by at some point too, Greta Gates, she teaches over at State. You could bring along the friend who was with you hiking if you want.

LEE
She's in graduate school in Sweden now, actually. I'm free Saturday afternoon after about two. Is Del Roy that abandoned town?

DAVID
Yeah, it's related. Can you pick me up in front of the Arts Building at like 2:30? We just want to be out of the woods by dusk. It sneaks up on you out there.

(We hear a car door open, and a spattering of rain. David gets inside.)

DAVID
Hello hello...

LEE
Hiya.

DAVID
Got all your travel arrangements made?

LEE
Just about. I'll have about five dollars left in the bank when I start the residency, but...

DAVID
Meh, that's about three less than I had, you'll be fine.

(They pull away from the curb.)

DAVID
I hope you'll humor me a bit today. If I seem like I'm drawing this tale out, it's intentional. Can't fight the storytelling urge.

LEE
This has really gotten built up in my imagination, I'll have you know.

DAVID

Get on 34 north, that's the best way to go.

So I can at least tell you now what I was doing out in the woods that year. It was a fiction writer's retreat that Crossover Press sponsored. Nothing grandiose, ten or twelve of us, about half local people, including Greta Gates. Two weeks out in cabins to work on whatever projects we had going at the time... some seclusion, a couple of common dinners, a group hike one day, that kind of thing. I think the cabins had pretty much been vacant for a couple years; you might have noticed they were pretty grungy.

LEE

We only stuck our heads into one or two, but the word "begrimed" came to mind.

DAVID

You must have come maybe two hours after we all left. We left very suddenly. How long were you there?

LEE

Fifteen minutes maybe.

DAVID

We came back just after dawn. Not all of us. Anyway... first stop, Del Roy. What do you know about it?

LEE

I only know it's historic because of the fire of 18-something-something.

DAVID

Good. I can fill up your head with almost whatever nonsense I want.

(We hear two car doors close, and soft footsteps through gravel, eventually settling on grass. The ghost town is completely silent.)

LEE

Is this the whole thing, pretty much?

DAVID

Yeah, this was Main Street. See the iron ruts in the grass where they planned a streetcar line? The fire started here on the south side, went all the way up there to the treeline.

(We hear a camera shutter clicking, again and again.)

LEE

What year was that?

DAVID

1898.

LEE

What all was here?

DAVID

Post office... grocer.... a foundry—past that edifice over there, that's the rusted frame of it with all the vines on it, that's all that's left, just a small bit of the main floor. Hotel.... six or seven houses, and the doll factory.

LEE

Doll factory?

DAVID

Yeah, that's where it started, up here. Chesterdell Doll and Toy Manufacture. Check out the moss on this brickwork.

LEE

It's kind of beautiful, sort of.

DAVID

The boiler exploded in the middle of the night. Bad wiring or something. In two hours the whole street was beyond hope. Pretty much ended the town. It never came back.

LEE

"Ashes denote that fire was.
Respect the grayest pile,
For the departed creature's sake
That hovered there awhile."

(David echoes this last line simultaneously.)

LEE

Where are we in relation to the cabins?

DAVID

If you go through the woods about half a mile, you hit the Summoner Trail, and it's maybe ten minutes once you're on it.

LEE

If I'd seen ruins like this when I was maybe fifteen or sixteen, I'd have gotten so many ideas for stories...

DAVID

Yeah.

LEE

So are you gonna tell me the connection to the cabins now, or wait?

DAVID

It'll become clear.

(Back in the car, driving on.)

DAVID

We all got to the cabins on the Friday night a week before what happened. I was excited about it because I was finally trying to write another book, and it was good to see a couple of people I used to know from Blaine. We had dinner together those first two nights, and then mostly we were off by ourselves in our little hovels, but there was the usual fraternization. You think you can take all that silence and no internet, but it ain't easy.

LEE

I'd like to try.

DAVID

There was one guy there who didn't really seem to belong. His name was Robert D'Artagnan.

LEE

From the *Souls Calling* books? At a fiction writer's retreat?

DAVID

Yeah, he said he was there working on a novel, or something like that. I mean, I'm sure he got the slot at the retreat fair and square; he *is* a good writer. But right away, he clashed with a couple people for some of the crazier stuff he'd just published about spirit guides and discovering his powers as a medium. He was super quiet but ridiculously opinionated when he did speak. Everyone was like, "Who let *this* guy in here?"

LEE

Have you ever read the *Souls Calling* stuff?

DAVID

Only after that summer. There was more than his personality though. He seemed really secretive. Wouldn't give details about his project. Skipped the meals after that first one. Kind of locked himself away. Didn't go on the group hike on Thursday.

I just didn't like him. One of the writers there, a very nice woman who wrote historical romances, she told me he felt like a scary uncle who won't go home after Thanksgiving dinner. I always liked that.

LEE

Ever seen him again, talked to him?

DAVID

No.

LEE

I never really believed a word of his stuff.

DAVID

Me either.

(Later. Outdoors. We hear footsteps moving through leaves.)

NARRATOR

In January, if there is no pretty snow cover in the woods near Del Roy, the landscape there just looks like the end of the cycle of life.

LEE

This your first time back here?

DAVID

Yeah. I wish I hadn't gotten us a little lost; it gets dark so fast. *(more steps)* Here we go.

(They continue a little longer, then stop.)

LEE

They look very sad in wintertime. Did all of you park back at the overlook?

DAVID

Mmm-hmm. Lugging our stuff a mile down the trail, out of shape. Pretty comical sight. Did you two come from *that* direction?

LEE

I think so. What's this bigger cabin over here?

DAVID

Bathrooms, running water, and four electrical outlets.

LEE

You want me to get some pictures here too?

DAVID

No, actually. Changed my mind.

(More footsteps. Then, while Lee hangs back, David climbs two wooden steps.)

LEE

They look even worse than they did from my memory.

DAVID

Maybe we were the last ones to set foot inside.

It was this one, this was the one I was in. Wood stove, I liked that part. I liked walking in the trees and collecting the wood, stoking the fire, that *tink* sound when you close the little door. In here for... nine nights, and then the thing happened on the second Sunday night. Late. Past two a.m.

I need to get inside to tell the rest of it, I really do.

LEE

You do?

DAVID

Looks like if I *blew* on this lock, it would break. Tell you what, ten dollar bonus if we get arrested.

LEE

Can *I* do it? I always wanted to kick a door open, like a cop in a movie.

DAVID

Après vous...

(She steps up to the door.)

DAVID

Wait... may as well *try* the door first, you never know.

(We hear the door being pushed open.)

LEE

Dammit. *There's* a chance I'll never get again...

(Their footsteps enter the cabin and explore a bit.)

LEE

There's no upstairs, right?

DAVID

Nope. Walk around, go into the kitchenette. Get the feel.

LEE

When is your friend meeting us? Greta.

DAVID

She's not coming.

LEE

No?

DAVID

No. I think she's afraid of me.

(David stops in one place.)

DAVID

I would watch the sun rise out this window each morning.

So we'd been here for a week, happy as beavers, writer people doing their individual things, fighting for laptop charging space in the bathroom shack... and on that Sunday night, we were all in our cabins, asleep mostly. I don't know if you remember, but it was really nice out, light breeze, maybe eighty degrees.

At about ten-thirty I went out and started walking down the trail in the direction of the overlook, and about halfway there I heard footsteps coming up behind me. It was Robert D'Artagnan. He was going pretty fast, he didn't see me until he almost ran into me. Didn't even have a flashlight. He had one hand up blocking his eyes, like this. I asked him where he was going and he said he wasn't feeling well, he was going to drive to the urgent care in town.

There was something wrong with his voice; it was so hoarse he barely sounded human. And he kept his hand right where it was. Never looked at me, never let me see his eyes. When I offered to help, he cut me flat and kept on walking, like a blind man.

LEE

How come *you* were out there that late?

DAVID

Ah yes. Well, you see, I was being bad. I wasn't alone in my cabin that night, or the night before. One of the other writers had decided to join me. But... she was married. Very suddenly she'd become paranoid that her husband was coming to check on her, he was that kind of guy.

Sorry, but that's the truth of what happened. There's no way around it. So I was walking all the way to the overlook to see if he was parked there, and watching her.

LEE

Okay...

DAVID

There was no sign of him, so I went back. I'm not sure why, but I went to Robert's cabin and tried to look in. It was locked tight, and dark. Sarah and I turned in around midnight.

You might want to sit down for this.

(We hear Lee cross the floor and sit in a creaky chair.)

DAVID

I'm cold...

(He steps over to the door and closes it, shutting them in.)

DAVID

There are three things I learned about terror that night. Three distinct things I never suspected. If you're going to keep writing dark tales, it's information I think you could use. As for me, it ruined me.

I woke up in the middle of the night because Sarah was shaking me. She'd heard a commotion a couple doors down, and a door fly open. Hildie Molitt had woken up in the dark and seen someone sitting in a wicker chair across the room, inside her locked cabin. Just the silhouette of a head and shoulders. Someone very small. When she sat up, the person had moved. Jumped down from the chair, and then for a split second she'd gotten a better look. She screamed and bolted out the door.

A little ways down from that, a couple of other writers were waking up. An older guy, Estevan Alberto—he was short-listed for a Pulitzer Prize once—was making tea in his kitchenette, and he heard his oil lamp fall over and break in the central room. He came out and saw someone small running around the pieces in a circle, around the tiny fire that had started, clapping their hands. Estevan was the fourth or fifth one out his door that night, after he'd frantically put out the fire.

I had my legs thrown over one side of the bed, and Sarah was halfway off the other side. We just listened for a second. We heard people leaving their cabins, fast. We heard an actual scream then; that's what really got us moving. There's no sound like a scream in the woods.

We had no light on in here, nothing at all, not even a candle. Sarah got to the door first, but something was there, in her way. *Someone*. Came up to maybe her waist. This tiny person wasn't threatening us. He was just... spinning around. Spinning around in place. His fist hit Sarah on the hip. She screamed; she said it was cold.

LEE

Who were they?

DAVID

Of all of us, Lon Tuchman got the best look. He said he usually fell asleep by enough candlelight to burn the whole compound to the ground. He woke up when the commotions started. He was lying there looking at the window across the room. Someone was standing there, inside the cabin, standing on a wooden crate and pounding on the glass, like trying to get out. Pounding and pounding again and again, but not able to break the glass because there wasn't nearly enough strength in those little hands. Then the person turned. Lon heard the head swivel. It was a cracking sound.

He was the first of any of us to say it. It was a doll, a wooden doll. Three feet high. Wearing a black hat. A child wearing a man's suit. A face with no expression. Lon thought most of it was painted black, but then he decided it was probably... scorch marks.

Before *I* could do it, Sarah slapped the one that was blocking our door, slapped it so hard I saw the shape fly back into the wall and collapse there. I smelled something, like burnt lumber, burnt pine. Sarah yanked the cabin door open so hard it hit me in the face. She ran out and I turned and I saw the doll crawling on the floor, trying to get up again. It was wearing a dress, that much I know. Then I was gone too. In the dark out there everyone was moving away from their cabins towards the clearing.

The first thing I learned about terror that night was that it's such a thief of dignity. Sarah couldn't get a word out, she was looking at her hand, the one she'd used to slap the doll, like she was horrified at it being part of her body. She'd felt the doll's face. Hildie Molitt was blubbing, making word-like noises but no one could understand her. Paul Lombaugh... Jesus. I asked him what happened and all he said was *I saw it move*, but the O sound went on and on as it came out of him, like his mind was repeating a track on a record, and he sat down on the ground like a baby.

We were all like that. A couple people just ran into the woods. Greta wouldn't stop shrieking. Her eye... she burst a blood vessel from it. Some guy, I forget his name, was just saying *No* over and over again. He'd seen a doll sitting on the floor of his kitchenette. It started to get up but

then just *rolled* towards him. Didn't have a left arm. The left arm was missing. The guy upended his worktable as he ran and knocked over a bottle of wine his daughter had given him, and later he started to cry thinking of it. *The wine is gone*, he said.

Do you believe any of this?

LEE

Why would you lie?

DAVID

The second thing I learned, I guess, was that terror cements bonds that should never have been made. Sarah and I, we'd just met, but the way she looked at me, and physically gripped me, like a little girl reaching for her father... like we'd depended on each other our entire lives, and it was all leading up to this. *Save me, help me, never let me go*, that's what we were really saying to each other in that moment. *Only you can save me. So do it*. And I swear I thought, *Who are you to ask this of me? Of all the people I've ever known?*

When we ran from the cabins they were still in there. We could all see one in the window pop its head up and then out of sight again. I forget whose cabin that was, but we could see it. Long flowing hair. Jerky motions, you know, from the wooden construction. They were all so big for dolls. Maybe that's the way they made them back in the day.

We gathered up and started down the trail. I seemed to become the leader somehow, keeping everything tight together. We got a few hundred feet down and stopped and collected ourselves. Ten, eleven adults and not one of us had the guts to go back.

And then... I don't know if this really happened, but I thought I saw something running low through the woods off to my right. Moving fast but... strange. I didn't tell anyone.

Did I bring a cup of coffee with me..?

LEE

You didn't. What then?

DAVID

We walked all the way to the overlook. I was always doing a head count. Between us we had a few cellphones and three people had their car keys. We knew there was a Denny's in town, so we met up there. We didn't know what else to do. There wasn't nearly as much talking as you'd think, but there was some. No talk at all about going to the police.

I remember Lon telling me at the restaurant that when he'd looked back over his shoulder as we started down the trail, he saw his door swinging back and forth. He could see that even through the dark.

At some point in there, you and your friend came along and left again.

We all went back to the trailhead and some of us slept on the benches they have there, some of us in the cars. We were waiting till it was light to go back.

Got there at sunup. Got our things. We left individually. It was like we couldn't look at each other anymore. I was the last to go. Sarah was one of the first. I never saw her again.

It's 4:46. We need to start walking back. Now. Dammit, why didn't I bring a flashlight?

(We hear them walking down the trail again. Just a little rain falls.)

LEE

There weren't calls to each other after that, or....

DAVID

No. We didn't even discuss the silence, we all just fell into it. Maybe everyone's told their friends, relatives by now, I don't know. But I never did, and I think most of the others like me.

LEE

Anyone ever mention Robert D'Artagnan?

DAVID

No. Who knows what he thought when he returned for his things, or what he thought when he saw we were all gone.

LEE

And no one ever went back, like... to spend the night or...

DAVID

I never even thought about that possibility.

LEE

What was the third thing? That you learned?

(David stops walking.)

LEE

What are you looking at? You see something out there?

DAVID

It was just a deer, probably.

Not a one of us has written much of anything since then. *That* much I could learn by keeping my ear to the ground. Most of all me. Being scared that bad, even by something that didn't physically hurt us... it does something terrible to you.

I *can't* drive, you know that? I get so anxious behind the wheel when I sense cars closing in... it goes beyond the inability to think of something to write; it's *everywhere* in me. As if the panic those things seemed to be experiencing that night in the dark, the anger even, got into me.

And I have these moments, these bad moments when I feel the need to *do* something to someone to... expunge it.

LEE: The car's up ahead. Come on.

(Their footsteps resume.)

(The sounds of driving, rain hitting the windshield hard, and wipers clearing it away.)

LEE

Do you think you're getting better?

DAVID

Oh... probably. The mind adapts. Is it clearer why I took you out there?

LEE

You have no real intention of telling the story to anyone else, do you. Or writing about it.

DAVID

Correct.

LEE

I think it pains you when I write dark things. Ghost stories. Anything like that. I think you just tried to terrify me out of it forever.

DAVID

The first story I ever published was a ghost story. Now... I'm like the second amendment guy who one day accidentally shoots a child. I'm a cliché. But your storytelling ability is so *rare*, your depth of feeling for your characters... I just wish you'd follow it to the more noble places the mind was meant for. Because you can take other people with you there, you have that power. Thousands, maybe tens of thousands of people, by the hand, wherever you want.

Is Herk Dillitch what you want to show them? Is a haunted house?

LEE

There are deeper reasons people write such things than for an audience.

DAVID

Maybe someday we'll get into that too.

(Later.)

This is my building, on the right.

LEE

What about the photos of Del Roy... you *want* those, right?

DAVID

Sure. Can you upload those to the G drive for safekeeping?

(The engine goes into idle.)

LEE

Well, I hope I get a chance to come back in August after the residency... there's so much more I'd like to talk about.

DAVID

You know where to find me. I really appreciated all this. You're a fine listener, and the best assistant our sorry department ever had. Give 'em hell at Blaine, sport.

(He gets out of the car, slams the door shut. Then, Lee leans over and rolls down the passenger's window.)

LEE *(calling after him)*

Hey...

(David returns, sticks his head back in the window.)

DAVID

Yeah?

LEE

A couple of people have mentioned you have some ... extreme teaching methods.

DAVID

Ha, I like to think so.

LEE

There's no chance that... this whole story was just a psych-out... just to get me to move away from writing horror? All of this was *true*, right? You wouldn't have gone to such an *insane* ruse on my account?

DAVID

"Better my pen lie still, perhaps, than bring one more word of darkness into a light-starved world."

LEE

Who wrote that?

DAVID

That one's me. Remember, *you* approached *me* about finding those cabins. Remember?

LEE

That's not quite a denial. What if I wanted to talk to the other people from the retreat?

DAVID

Oh... I suppose I'd be terribly hurt that you didn't believe me.

Drive safe.

(We hear his wet footsteps depart. After a moment, the passenger's side window rolls back up.)

LEE'S VOICE

I drove eight miles through the dark toward home, thinking how little I really knew about this man even after all these months. I had almost convinced myself that yes, David Unseld was a complicated, well-intentioned liar I needed to separate myself from, when I pulled over on lonely Junetown Road because the rain was coming down so hard I was scared to go on.

And I heard something small move in the back seat.

compulsion

My name is Adam Virdon. I was six years old when I first dared to wonder aloud why I had never met my grandmother, Audrey. Every Friday at school they sent us home with the cafeteria's lunch menu for the following week; at the bottom of one of these they'd added a note that Grandparent's Day was coming up the day before Thanksgiving. *Where does grandma live?* I asked my father at the dinner table that night, and he told me that grandma lived in Canada and led a very simple life on a farm without a phone. I'd received a birthday card from her two years before, in 1974, but not since. One day, my father said, she'd visit, or we'd fly out.

But as the years went on, and only one more birthday card ever came—signed with just my grandmother's name, nothing else—I detected an unwillingness on my father's part to ever mention her. He was a great man in many ways, but he could be severe; he was a television director and to me he always seemed to come home under great stress. I learned not to challenge him. Here's all I'd managed to glean about Grandma Audrey: She'd given birth to my father when she was very, very young, and had married again after her divorce from my grandfather, a sailor. My father had run away from home when he was sixteen and never looked back. For all my childhood, my mother seemed to silently follow his lead and revealed almost nothing about the woman either. Even those two birthday cards were presented to me without envelopes, and so I never saw the address they came from.

(From a police recording)

DETECTIVE MURA: Okay, I want to go back and establish the timeline of your visit to 530 Lamp Road. You had said initially that you got there at about half past two, is that right?

ADAM: Yeah.

DETECTIVE MURA: So take me through, ah... describe for me what you saw as you approached the property, from the time you turned off the highway.

ADAM: From the 5, I got on Lamp Road for about a fifth of a mile, and then it diverted to the left and right, I went right and went down a path, it was gravel, kind of through some woods, and then there was an open clearing, and that's where the house was.

DETECTIVE MURA: So without any signs on that road, and without a house number, how did you know you'd arrived where you intended?

ADAM: I saw someone had painted on a tree before the fork. There were three numbers, 530 and 550 and I think 570, and 530 had an arrow to the right. It was kind of a guess.

DETECTIVE MURA: Okay. And where did you leave your vehicle when you stopped it?

ADAM: In the grass, there wasn't a driveway or anything, it's just kind of a field there.

DETECTIVE MURA: How far away from the house were you?

ADAM: About twenty yards.

DETECTIVE MURA: And the ice cream truck was where in relation to your car?

ADAM: Off to my left, about twenty feet away.

DETECTIVE MURA: Did you know what it was when you first saw it?

ADAM: I knew it was an ice cream truck, that's it.

DETECTIVE MURA: And how would you describe the condition of the house from the outside?

ADAM: Dilapidated, not very well cared-for.

One night when I was eleven or twelve, January I think it was, I was up in my room and I heard my father downstairs, arguing with someone on the phone. It escalated gradually, with my mother occasionally urging my father to lower his voice. But he was clearly flustered. When it became clear to me that he was yelling at Grandma Audrey over the line, I crept out of my room, to the top of the staircase, and sat on the third step from the top, listening raptly.

My father was making it abundantly clear to Audrey that not only would we not be visiting her anytime soon, she was not welcome in our home. The last words I heard my father say were, *You need to learn about consequences*. Then he hung up. There was some hushed conversation

between he and my mother which I couldn't hear. When I sensed him leaving the kitchen, I scrambled back to my room and turned up the TV, feeling ashamed.

The next day, my mother finally broke her silence. I remember I was in the back yard near dusk playing pitchback in the early evening chill—you know, the game where you throw a tennis ball at a metal frame with a taut netting and it bounces back to you again and again. My father was off buying a car in Burbank. I went inside our kitchen to see what was for dinner and my mother was just putting some spaghetti on the table for me. We ate as it got dark outside.

So, your grandma, she said at one point, obviously realizing she and my father couldn't go on like this forever, keeping her a secret. My mother told me Audrey had a problem, a compulsion, which kept her from having a normal life, and kept causing her to make some very bad decisions. What that compulsion was exactly, I was a little afraid to ask, and details were not forthcoming. But it was the reason my father had run away from home when he was a teenager, and until grandma got her compulsion under control, if she ever could, my father thought it was best to keep our lives very separate.

I assumed the issue was alcohol, maybe even hard drugs. Or maybe she was a thief. I asked if she was dangerous. No, my mother assured me, not dangerous, but that didn't mean it was a good thing to be around her. She advised me to follow my father's cue, not get overzealous, and eventually I'd be able to make up my own mind about grandma, who was still quite young then; that year, by my calculations, she would have only turned forty-eight. Of course at twelve, this seemed incredibly old to me. But I did exactly what my mother told me. I waited. I pretty much forgot about grandma. It wasn't like I was lacking in things to think about, daydream about, explore.

The night after my graduation from high school about five years later, in 1988, my father came home from work unusually early, about five o'clock. My mother hastily made him some dinner, which he ate quickly over the sink, and then he got ready to go out again. I was in the basement sorting some clothes to be donated when he appeared in the doorway to let me know he'd be back again the next night, and maybe we could have a game of backgammon then. No explanation about where he was going.

When he did return on June 11, it was almost midnight. I was in the kitchen making a Mama Celeste pizza. He came in shaking the water from his hair; it was still raining lightly hours after it had started. He sat down utterly exhausted.

He told me he'd been visiting my grandmother in the hospital, near Montreal, nearly three thousand miles away. She had nearly died. It was her compulsion, he told me. She couldn't control herself, and for the second time in five years, she had paid an awful physical price. But instead of finally telling me exactly what that compulsion was, my father only lectured to me very quietly.

Do not fall into the belief, he said, *that family ties are unbreakable. You have a responsibility only to yourself in this life. Sentimentality will trap you, sentimentality will drag you down.* He told me to consider my grandmother something from the past, or something that never truly was, and move on. He'd already spent too much time going back to his childhood, he said. He was done. With that, he got up from the kitchen table and went to bed.

I was twenty-one before I finally learned he'd never gone to Montreal. He'd spent the night of June 10 instead at a motel nineteen miles from our house, checking in there after visiting grandma in nearby Henry Mayo Newhall Hospital as she lay near death. The Canada lie was meant to deceive me into thinking she still lived far enough away to put her out of mind. Since 1972, she had never lived more than an hour's drive away.

DETECTIVE MURA: Now... you did not approach the ice cream truck at first, correct?

ADAM: No, I went right up to the house.

DETECTIVE MURA: So what details of the truck did you glean as you went by it?

ADAM: Just the name on the side of it, and that it was kind of old.

DETECTIVE MURA: Did you look through its windows at all, or....

ADAM: From that angle, I really couldn't even if I wanted to.

DETECTIVE MURA: Were there any signs of it being driven recently, or moved?

ADAM: No.

DETECTIVE MURA: All right, I'm going to show you a photo... you don't remember seeing this handprint on the side of the truck? Right there, near the wheel well?

In March of 1992, a few days after my twenty-second birthday, my fiancée showed me a snippet from the Police Beat section of the Santa Clarita newspaper and asked me, *Could this be your grandmother they're talking about?* Audrey Virdon, age fifty-eight, had been arrested for trespassing, burglary, and theft on the campus of Cal-State Fullerton University. No, I told her without looking at the full snippet; my grandmother lived in Canada, she wasn't local. I went back to trying to fix the screen on my laptop. *I hope not*, said my fiancée, *because this woman seems deeply disturbed*. I asked her what she meant, and she handed me the newspaper.

Two weeks later, I walked into Orange County Circuit Court to witness the sentencing in the case of Audrey Virdon, and see my grandmother for the first time in my life. She did not know I was in the gallery, one of only three people to attend as spectators, by my count. Neither my mother nor my father knew I was there either.

The case was not a very complex one and there had been no actual trial. My grandmother had agreed to enter an Alford plea, accepting a guilty verdict on certain conditions beneficial to her as a defendant. That afternoon there was to be simply a summation of the case by both sides before a judge, a reading of the plea and formal agreement to it, and then sentencing, which had been arranged beforehand.

I was about twelve feet from my grandmother when she came into the room behind her court-appointed attorney. At fifty-eight, she looked probably ten years older than her age. Her hair was long and dyed black. She was thin, pale, and small. Her skin was blotchy. Her eyes seemed very alive though, very green and vivid. The resemblance to my father was undeniable. She sat down calmly, dressed in a white blouse that was too big for her.

Grandma Audrey had been arrested a little after 4 a.m. on July 13th, leaving the grounds of Cal State Fullerton in a 1981 Toyota Corolla after swerving dramatically on a campus feeder road, though she'd only been going about fifteen miles per hour. Upon being pulled over by campus security, she was detained until a state patrol car could come, and a formal arrest was made. In the back seat of my grandmother's car had been a banana crate filled with twelve bottles of dark liquid. She'd broken into a chem lab just a few hundred yards away and taken them from a medical refrigerator.

The blood in those bottles was being used as part of an eight-month university study on tetanus vaccinations. It had been extracted from children.

After the prosecution's four-minute summation of the case, my grandmother's attorney rose and explained to the judge that an Alford plea was to be entered today, with both the prosecution and the defense having agreed that because the monetary value of the stolen samples could not be established as having risen to the level of a felonious offense without the further cooperation of the biomedical company that produced them—cooperation the company was unwilling or unable to provide at that time—it was more expedient to settle the case now.

My grandmother was asked to stand to enter her plea. She was asked a series of questions requiring a one-word response. Did she understand that an Alford plea was equivalent to a guilty plea, did she understand that she was waiving her right to a trial, et cetera. To each question she answered Yes, automatically, robotically. When the list of questions was complete, she was free to walk out of the courtroom, her deal to receive a sentence of four years of probation complete. She exchanged a quiet word with her attorney and left.

No mention had been made by either the prosecution or the defense about the accused's intention for the bottles she'd stolen from the chem lab, or how she'd known where to find them. Arguments of motive had apparently been deemed by both sides as either irrelevant or out of bounds in this oh-so-minor case, which seemed to have been affected greatly by both the biochem company's and the university's interest in resolving things as quietly as possible.

From a good distance away, I saw Grandma Audrey collect her things from a property desk located down a quiet hallway and leave the courthouse alone. From the lobby of the building I watched her cross the parking lot and get into the same car in which she'd been arrested. She pulled into traffic and disappeared.

There was a more familiar car waiting for me at my apartment when I got there fifteen minutes later. My mother got out of it and intercepted me. My fiancée had told her where I had been. It was time to reveal more of the story.

Mom and I went to a nearby coffeehouse, where she told me she'd seen the notice in the newspaper about Audrey's arrest and had tried to keep it from my father. So far, she believed, she thought she'd been successful, but it was likely only a matter of time before he found out

about what had happened. It was true: Audrey had always lived in the area, kept away from the family first by obfuscation and then outright intimidation. My father was unswerving in his insistence that she come nowhere near.

No one seemed to know exactly how my grandmother's compulsion had taken hold, my mother told me, but she'd gleaned in the years of her marriage that my father traced it to an accident which had taken my grand-uncle's life when he and his sister were eleven years old. Audrey had witnessed it, a collision between two boats. It had apparently been gruesome, with multiple victims, and there had followed a couple years of intense silent withdrawal from everything around her during a most critical time in her emotional development. Maybe it was significant somehow that this development took place while she was spending her nights and summers working as a specimens packer for a company in Altadena called Oakwood Biological Supply, which provided legally sourced animal remains for use in scientific study and classroom teaching. About thirty years later they would begin to provide film productions with remains for use in simulating gore. This was a fact of my grandmother's life I had to research myself.

Whisperings among the extended family, which cropped up in letters and rumors over the decades, hinted that she'd first drunk human blood as a teenager, and had never stopped. This was not being a vampire, my mother pointed out, as she understood it. Audrey had never attacked anyone. This was haematomania, an undeniable craving for the sensations that drinking blood brought for some: of restored vitality, of an imagined extended youth. The act was medically endurable, if unhealthy, and didn't necessarily point to an aberrant lifestyle or one that couldn't be compartmentalized.

But Audrey was different somehow. She dropped out of high school to give birth to my father and was married shortly after. Only three weeks after that courthouse ceremony, her husband tried to have her committed to a psychiatric facility. She went on to have several jobs; she tried another marriage after the first one disintegrated; she did provide for her only child. But the compulsion was apparently always there.

My father had learned of it very suddenly, one day when he was twelve. Audrey was raising him alone by then. There came a week when she simply couldn't seem to get out of bed. He once told my mother of a three-day stretch when he only knew Audrey as a weak voice through her bedroom door as she told him again and again not to come in, that she needed just a little more time to get well. Finally, late at night, my father had opened the door, just a crack, peering in. Audrey lay in bed under a quilt, a small lamp on beside her. She stared at the ceiling, breathing softly and evenly. Around her mouth was a ring of dried blood.

The discovery, a year later, of a tobacco can half full of the stuff had caused my father to watch Audrey much more closely, and slowly begin to separate from her as she endured lengthy unexplained illnesses and wild energy swings.

At sixteen, my father had found Audrey lying in the backyard, dazed, the knuckles on her left hand smeared with blood. When he roused her, she merely rose, walked past him, made him a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese for dinner, and asked him if he'd had a good day at school. It had been the middle of his summer vacation; he hadn't been to school for over a month. He ran away from home the following week, and rarely saw her again.

Mom swore me to secrecy about our meeting there in the coffeehouse, and I kept my word. But two days later, I got a piece of mail from my father. A handwritten note said this:

How many times have I tried to impress on you the need to empathize with people who live differently, and that they should never be judged or outcast. But look at this photo, and remember it. Love, Dad.

I lifted a black and white photograph from the envelope. He'd found it as a teenager and had kept it his whole life. In the photo, some people were gathered at a basement party, each holding up to the camera a very small champagne flute filled with a dark liquid. Audrey, wearing a long flower dress, did the same. Each of those smiling people, her included, had something small impressed upon their foreheads. My eyesight was good enough twenty-five years ago to see that they were dark thumbprints. Someone had long ago written a caption below the photo in faded marker. The words said: SANGUINARIANS AND DONORS PARTY, JULY 24, 1954.

Sanguinarians and donors.

I had become fascinated by my grandmother by then. You see, since my adolescence, I had learned a little something about compulsion myself, the consuming need to engage in a very specific and possibly self-destructive behavior. I had one of my own, something very different from Audrey's, but I had begun to wonder how much my ungovernable subconscious was like hers.

DETECTIVE THEWLIN: What was the interior of the house like?

ADAM: Cluttered, a lot of stuff lying around, knickknacks, not very clean.

DETECTIVE THEWLIN: Did you see any evidence of unusual behavior, out of the ordinary behavior?

ADAM: Ahh.... not of the kind that I had been concerned about.

My fascination and fear for my own steadiness of mind was what sent me to my grandmother's home on 530 Lamp Road in a rural section of town nine miles from the apartment I shared with my fiancée. It was two-thirty p.m., July 15th, 1992.

My grandmother seemed to have no phone number, so I showed up unannounced. I had set out to go grocery shopping that day but wound up caving in to my curiosity.

Lamp Road was unlined and decaying along its borders, and it split off in two places onto gravel roads cutting through short stretches of woods. I followed an arrow I spotted on a tree and bumped along a hundred shady yards to a clearing where a modular home sat on a wide grassy lot. The lot sloped gently upwards towards a long chain link fence. Beyond the fence were parked rows of school buses that didn't seem to be in operation; maybe they were being repaired by the county out here in the middle of nowhere, or maybe they had long since become scrap. Insects buzzed in the weeds all around.

I parked my car near an old ice cream truck bearing the words SUMMER ISLAND CREAMERY, painted in pink and orange. From around the side of the house peeked an old blue Volvo. I got out, sweating a little already in the afternoon humidity. Thunderclouds were rolling away after a noon shower, but the sun was still nowhere. It occurred to me that this was the kind of scene my father must have run from, never to return to a rural life of struggle, a house in need of painting, a No Trespassing sign in a dirty window, and weeds choking a rusting lawnmower beside the stump of a tree.

I went up and knocked on an unlatched screen door. I felt relief when I thought maybe no one was here. But then the door was pushed outward, and there she was. Grandma Audrey. She wore a green t-shirt with the name of a local church on it, and baggy shorts. I told her who I was. Her initial look of confusion and suspicion softened. She looked at me in quiet wonder, without ever really smiling. And after a very awkward hug, she invited me in to talk.

The place smelled like Lysol and cabbage. No air conditioning. Mismatched furniture, lots of knickknacks lying around, but no photographs, no mementoes. Even with the shades all up it was kind of dark, this small pre-fabricated house that had probably been delivered to this lot on a truck decades before. Grandma Audrey brought me iced tea poured from a plastic pitcher into a glass with Schroder from the Peanuts cartoons on it. I sat in a wicker chair and she sat across from me on a dark purple sofa. The TV was off, which sort of looked second-hand, was off and a little dusty.

When my grandmother spoke, she didn't bring up the past, and I didn't either. She seemed only politely interested now in where I had gone to school, what my hobbies were, when I'd gotten engaged, what my master's degree studies would be in. There were one or two questions about my father's and mother's current health. Audrey herself was as pale as when I'd seen her under the courthouse lighting, and moved with the slowness of someone a fair bit older than fifty-eight. She looked very small on the sofa. Her responses to my questions were short and direct and didn't allow much room for exploration.

I felt so foolish as I sat there drinking that flavorless iced tea. I would never be able to ask her what I really wanted to. *When did you first feel the overpowering need to keep doing something you knew would so isolate you? When did you decide not to fight it anymore? And is that what I should do with a different compulsion, one that's starting to threaten the nice, normal adulthood I've tried to plan for myself?*

I was looking for help but there was no comfort level here, no familial bond, and no answers. Just an unwell woman wanting to live her small, shunned life in peace. I limped through a few questions about the things she liked to read and began to look for a way out of the conversation. Maybe I'd come back someday, but likely not.

I heard a door open down a hallway and turned my head. A man was emerging from the only bedroom in the house. He moved slowly toward the living room, wearing a dark blue bathrobe over not one but two sweaters, and dark corduroy pants. Bare feet. He was very, very tall, almost six and a half feet, and thin to the point of emaciation.

This man stopped before entering the living room and looked at me hard. His hollow blue eyes were locked in a state of seemingly permanent alarm, as if every sight in creation was deeply troubling to him. His hair was home cut, extremely short, uneven and unkempt. He was slightly

hunched over, like from some premature nutritional deficiency. I thought then that he couldn't have been much older than I was, maybe twenty-five.

This is my boyfriend, Jody, my grandmother said. Jody did not approach me for a handshake. He stood rooted in place, eyes frozen. I saw that his hands trembled a little. *Come sit down here near me*, Audrey told him, and he took the place beside her on the sofa. I tried not to stare at the most dramatic feature of Jody's appearance. The left half of his neck was very discolored, the rough, furrowed skin there seemingly patched on in a wide place where much of the neck was simply... gone.

He had yet to say anything at all. Grandma's boyfriend. His skinny body swam in those two sweaters. It was as if he were trying to appear bulkier in a misguided projection of vanity.

I asked Jody what he did. *Walk dogs*, he said. Audrey informed me that he was attacked by one two years ago. *He does magic tricks, too*, she said, *he's very good*. She rose to get him a glass of iced tea.

I shifted awkwardly in my chair and asked Jody what his inspiration had been for that, for his magic. *Houdini*, he said, his weird wide-eyed glare never fading. *Where did you park?* he asked me. I told him I parked just in front, near the ice cream truck. *Is that a going business?* I asked.

At that moment, Audrey returned and held a new glass out to Jody, touching it gently to his knee and waiting for him to cradle it with his hands. She was just a little unsteady and a few drops went over the rim of the glass, touching Jody's corduroys. *Oops*, my grandmother said gently.

Jody's haunted-looking eyes grew even bigger and he drew a huge quavering breath into his lungs, as if she'd just touched a hot poker to his leg and he was processing the pain in stages. He craned his head slowly toward her as she apologized and patted his shoulder. Jody looked like a man utterly confused and panicked by the slightest discomfort or deviation from what he thought the next moment would bring. At the same time he looked like an elaborate, crudely made marionette that was being controlled by an unseen hand. When he eventually exhaled and settled again, he clenched his glass of iced tea tightly but did not drink from it.

Audrey told me that no one had even touched the truck in years. It was there when she'd moved in. *That truck won't run and no one's even got a key*, Jody said. *Don't even bother with it, it can't be sold*. I was about to affirm that I had no interest in buying their ice cream truck, but kept quiet.

I had never felt more like I'd stepped into another world where I did not belong and was not welcome. I decided that if three more seconds passed without either one of them saying anything, just three more, I would tell them I had to get to work and go. But then Jody asked why I had come. I said I had just been curious to meet my grandmother, but he said, *Why today?*

I honestly don't remember how I responded. I was overwhelmed with the need to get out of there. I blundered a few more nonsensical things and then I remember being at the front door again, with Jody still sitting stone-faced on the sofa, shaking his head from side to side for some reason, though I'd said nothing to cause such a reaction.

My grandmother followed me. I wasn't able to summon the good grace to offer a hug at the doorway. I gave her an awkward half-wave instead, and did the same for Jody, barely looking at him. And then I was out the rusty screen door and free of them.

DETECTIVE THEWLIN: At what point did you notice the cords on the ground, there in the grass?

ADAM: As soon as I started heading back to my car. I had a different angle now, so...

DETECTIVE THEWLIN: What did you think they were?

ADAM: Well, I could just hear the sound coming from inside the truck, kind of a humming sound, so I figured power was being run from the house into the truck to some kind of appliance.

DETECTIVE THEWLIN: Why do you think it was that you didn't hear the humming on your way in?

ADAM: I don't know. I think maybe spotting the cables made me stop for just a second, and things were quiet.

DETECTIVE THEWLIN: When you say "just a second," how long exactly?

ADAM: Literally just a second. I mean, I was walking and then I spotted the cables in the tall grass there, and it was just a hesitation in my step, you know. It was quiet enough to barely hear that sound. I know my refrigerator at home, for example, kicks on and off in a cycle, so maybe it was on a breaker, I honestly don't...

DETECTIVE THEWLIN: Do you think Jody Burr may have been watching you from inside the house and spotted you hesitate, and maybe he thought you saw the handprint on the side of the truck and heard that humming sound... and that was what made him decide to take action?

ADAM: I'm not sure.

DETECTIVE THEWLIN: OK, go on.

ADAM: I got in my car and got back onto that feeder path, that gravel road between the trees. I accelerated kind of slow because I was rolling up my windows and putting the AC on. I was going real carefully, I didn't want to pop a tire or something because there were so many potholes in the gravel. I was about halfway down the path, it was only like a hundred yards, and I saw the guy, Jody, in the rearview mirror. He was running down the path toward the car, as fast as he could. I literally thought at first it was a big animal or a hawk because the bathrobe he was wearing was billowing out as he ran.

He was holding an axe, he had both hands on it. That was what made me swerve and hit the brakes at the same time. I know hitting the brakes was the exact opposite of what I should have done, but it was instinct, it was shock. I hit that rut on the side of the path and the whole left side of the car shook, I bounced right off the seat. And when I recovered myself, he already had so much momentum that I went into self-defense mode instead of trying to floor it out of there.

He came up on my left side. He was just a blur, and he was swinging the head of the axe at the window, and it shattered, exploded into my face on the first swing, but the car kept rolling forward. Then it hit the side of the rut and stopped, so he had the chance to come at me through the window while I was trying to swat away all the glass. I was panicking because I felt it hit my face and a little bit of glass went into my mouth. I was trying to cough it out as I was waving my arms. I had my eyes closed. And then he must have lunged in with his entire head because I felt his mouth on my neck. I could feel him trying to bite down right on the front of it, right here.

I had my right hand on the car phone receiver and just for any kind of self-defense I swung it up into his face, and the top edge of it hit him right in the center of the forehead, and that got him out of the window. I opened my eyes finally and he was staggering backwards, and he just sat down, collapsed in the rut, dropped the axe, and there was a gout of blood running down his face from where I'd hit him with the top edge of the phone. Over his eyes, his nose, his mouth, this gout. He was staring at me. I got out of the car... and then he just fell over backwards in that sitting position, all at once.

DETECTIVE THEWLIN: Did you try to administer any sort of aid to Mr. Burr?

ADAM: No. I looked at him and I just... he looked dead. The car phone receiver was still in my hand. It had come apart, I'd hit him so hard, the two halves of the phone were split apart. I turned and walked back up toward the path toward my grandmother's house.

DETECTIVE THEWLIN: What were you hoping to accomplish there?

I don't know, I told the detective. *I don't know*. There was blood on my right hand from the strike to Jody's forehead, and the tiny cuts on my face and neck from the shattered glass had painted me with even more. My steps were unsteady and labored. I was breathing hard. All the colors of the world seemed impossibly vivid. The dappling effect of alternating light and shadow that streamed through the trees above me was disorienting and I kept squinting it away.

The humming sound coming from the ice cream truck could not have been more obvious now, even above the buzzing of the insects, as I stepped back onto the grass in the clearing. I walked up to the screen door and pulled on it. But now it was latched. I put my face to the mesh and looked in.

There were three people now, three figures standing in a semi-circle in the living room. My grandmother and two others: one young, heavily tattooed woman and one very old man in black with hair down to his shoulders. They were all facing the screen door, and I understand now that they had been waiting, waiting to see whether it was Jody or me who returned. Their expressions were sad, weary. Upon seeing me, they all exchanged a glance and a silent mutual decision was made, because now, no one was left among them who was willing to kill to keep the secret of the ice cream truck.

Each of them bent to lift a glass off the wobbly storage chest that served as a coffee table. One of the glasses was the Schroder design that I had sipped iced tea from. Now it was half-filled with blood, as were the others. Without delay, Audrey and her acquaintances raised their glasses simultaneously to their lips and drank, eyes closed, tilting their heads back to drain the contents in one long, savored motion.

I pulled on the door harder, shouting at them through the screen to let me in. By the time their glasses were emptied, with a thick crimson trail left staining the interior curves of each one, I was yanking on the door so hard it was nearly coming out of its frame. The young woman, blonde and tall, reached her left hand into one pocket of her gray hooded sweatshirt. From it she pulled a small oblong object. With her right hand she hooked her forefinger around a detonation pin and yanked it free. She set the grenade down on the trunk between them gently.

I had no more than three seconds to turn and run in the direction of the ice cream truck, hoping to get behind something large before the explosion. I didn't even come close. I thought at the end that my grandmother turned her head and looked at me in apology, and with a simple maternal fondness that had needed no contact in twenty-two years to be genuine.

A thunderclap erupted from inside the house and I felt something strike the back of my head. I went down hard into the weeds. Then, fire as a huge piece of burning wood fell squarely upon my back. The fire was expunged in an instant by the hailstorm of dirt and debris that roared above me. Just beyond my outstretched arm, I saw the ice cream truck through a swirling brown dust cloud that blotted out the sky, the truck in which police soon discovered Jody Burr's refrigerated and mostly desanguinated nineteen-year-old murder victim.

When that cloud cleared from 530 Lamp Road, it left just one victim of tenacious compulsion to tell the tale. People have shown *me* great sympathy over the decades for *my* problem, even my ex-wife, who left me after I gave away most of the money we'd saved during our marriage in another blind act of spontaneous and reckless altruism. The doctors tell me it's a narcissistic disorder, this ruinous habit that's left me with nothing to my name.

On weekends, my teenaged daughter hugs me sometimes and says pityingly, *You're a good person, Dad*, and I want to defend the great-grandmother Jenna grew up thinking of as a monster, and tell her that the only difference between that woman and the man who keeps giving everything he has to strangers is one mysterious quirk of chemical imbalance or imperfect nurturing. I think miniscule divergences are all that separate the good and evil, the lost and the saved. When Jenna visits, she never knows that I keep Audrey there with us, unseen and unjudged.

drop-ins

My name is Mark Rinker. When I was seven years old, my father pulled out his stolen cassette recorder and taped my grandmother singing an old folk ballad she once used as a lullaby with him. After he hung himself, the tape came into my possession, and five hours ago, at about 9:15, I pulled it out of the basement for the first time in twenty years and listened to it, the sounds scratching and stuttering through the air as I sat in the back yard, the recorder propped up on two cinder blocks. My grandmother, who had never once been outside the country or even west

of Ohio, sang in her croaky voice about a Scottish soldier gone far away until the weary tape jammed.

I was crying. I took the tape out and I threw it into the trash can by the back step. It was 9:58 and Kirk would arrive in two minutes. As many bad things as there were about him, he was never late. I sat on the sofa in the living room and waited.

I heard the porch door open at 10:01 and he came in without knocking, having parked his awful station wagon a mile away, as we'd agreed. He groused about almost getting killed by a passing car on Halt Horse Road, and griped about me living out in the middle of nowhere. He collapsed in a chair, sweating and drinking from a bottle of Sprite. He'd gotten a fractured skull in a hockey fight back when he played for the Wheeling Nailers, and long after they'd shaved his head to open him up he'd kept the look because he thought it made him seem tougher. He had a delayed reaction to the fact that none of the lights were on and then he mocked me for that too, said I was being overcautious. But I didn't want anyone looking at the house that night.

He informed me that my grandmother was dead, right on the pre-arranged schedule. I had him say it again for confirmation: She was dead. He followed me into the kitchen, where I had eight thousand dollars in cash stuffed inside a Ritz cracker box. Only after he crammed it all into the smallest pouch of his backpack did he tell me that not everything had gone exactly according to plan. Kirk had that way about him, a way of filling in the regrettable details only after he'd gotten what he wanted from you.

He'd woken up the day before and he'd immediately seen an omen, a bad omen, he said: A group of deer congregating in a perfect circle beneath his window in the courtyard of his apartment complex in Shepherdstown. That was all it took, seeing them standing there in the rain.

He'd called up some guy he knew, Amos, and cut him in on the deal if Amos would actually be the one to go in and take care of my grandmother instead of doing it himself, as we'd agreed. Amos, Kirk said, was the kind of person who could be counted on to solve a problem.

The problem was, my grandmother had fought back. Hard. It didn't seem possible to me. She was eighty-two years old. Spine crooked. Hands gnarled. But Kirk swore it was true. He'd never seen anything quite like it. It had gotten... messy. Amos had been forced to step up. There had been a lot of blood. But it had all been taken care of. No worries.

When Kirk told me all this I wanted to reach out and squeeze his neck until his head burst, but I knew he would destroy me if I so much as raised a finger to him. There was no need to do anything different at this point, he said, no need to "vector off," as he put it, and panic or improvise. It was all done, there were no witnesses, and our business was complete. To emphasize the point, he licked two of his fingertips and playfully reached forward to snuff out the candle I held between them. Kirk was terrible, Kirk was awful—but at least, I think I have said, he was never late.

He turned to go. At the door he turned back and told me to go for a walk and clear my head. If I didn't stop being so scared, he said, he might not be able to trust me so much, and we might have to have another conversation sometime.

I got the Mah-Jongg set from the hall closet and laid it out on the card table until about eleven. What I do is set up two sides and play against myself. It's because I like the little symbols on the pieces, they're so pretty, and I like the way the tiles clack against each other. It relaxes me. I like the routine of getting up after a turn, walking around to the other side of the table, and sitting down there, looking in the other direction. It makes me feel like two different people. It's even nicer in the candlelight. Sometimes I pretend I'm playing against my father and trying to beat him with all my might, and if I manage to do it, I laugh at him with bottomless scorn, and I sleep well that night.

Suddenly, right at the top of the hour, there was a knock at the front door. It jolted me so badly I almost knocked the candle over. I waited. No way was I going to answer that door. But then I saw a face appear at the living room window, peering in, one I recognized. I knew I had to get up.

It was Ben Ready. We used to call him Beady. He used to wear the thickest glasses you ever saw. He still wore them, but now they'd gotten sleek and stylish because he made a lot of money, or so I heard. I opened the door. The crickets across the road were really getting loud.

I hadn't seen Beady in almost ten years. I was so nervous that I set the candle down so he wouldn't see my hands shaking. He was dressed nicely, like he'd come from work. He hadn't been able to get an answer when he'd knocked at my grandmother's house an hour before, so he thought maybe she'd be here, at this place that had been willed to me. Her old Buick sat in the drive, dirty and unmaintained.

I had an answer fully memorized. I said I hadn't seen her for about a week. The car had been sitting there for months.

But Beady wouldn't just turn and go away. He kept asking me questions and finally wanted to come in. I knew I had to let him do it. Beady was smart. He had a master's degree in something or other. Beady was capable of suspecting things.

He didn't ask me about the darkness because he knew I was a nervous person and he had a little more class than someone like Kirk. I offered him water or a soda but he refused. He wasn't worried about my grandmother if I wasn't, but he was headed out of town that night and he thought it felt right to say so long to her. Back in the day he used to visit her all the time, every couple of months or so. She'd shown kindness to him when he was a messed-up kid. Maybe she was even the reason he'd gone to college. I don't know.

I tried not to ask too many questions. I wanted to keep things short, but I had to be polite and ask where he was headed, and he said he honestly did not even know. He kept grinning at me, like he was goading me to ask him more. His intelligence had made him conceited. He tripped a little over the cat box on his way to the kitchen, where he had not asked permission to go.

I didn't feel comfortable talking to him in there; the space was too tight. Now he wanted to know what I'd been doing for the last few years, why I hadn't been working, what I did all day in this house that was too big for me, where the county didn't even plow because the road was so long and narrow—why didn't I just sell it? Why did I stay here where there were no jobs, where everyone we'd ever known had left long ago? It felt like an interrogation. I pushed the back door open and I went out and stood in the yard.

He followed. I liked it better when Beady was just a silhouette out there near the decaying bird bath, and I didn't have to carry the candle around.

Beady looked up at the moon. He was never going to see this town again, he said. He told me he'd been doing some work for some people down on Sargo Road for a long time, people whose names he wasn't even allowed to know. Russians. A kind of contract job, he said, month after month in the crappy little building where Magradnick & Brothers used to make pool tables. A long time ago we would ride our bikes like little hellions down the twisty trail that started behind the lot.

Beady wanted to know if I'd ever wondered why an eight foot fence had gone up around that building six years ago, or why, if they were just processing food dye, like everyone here seemed to think, including me, no delivery trucks ever took anything out of there, only dropped things off. I didn't know the answer to any of this. No one ever went down Sargo Road, or cared what happened there.

Exactly, Beady said with that weird grin of his that told you he was the smartest one in the room. If you wanted to keep something secret, he said, you came to a nothing hick burg like ours, you got a place on Sargo Road, and you built a fence. He claimed the location had actually been his idea. Before that, the people he worked for had started in Volgograd. Russia, he added, as if I didn't know.

He slapped a mosquito away and shook his head sadly, pitying me. All I could see of his face was the glint of the moonlight off his glasses. *Poor Mark*, he said. *If I told you what we've been up to in there, you wouldn't get to sleep for a long time.* He'd walked out of there two hours ago without locking anything up. He hadn't even been back to his house.

Do you realize what they'd do to me, he said, *if they knew I hadn't sealed the place?* It was torture, every word out of his mouth, his games. Nothing had changed with him. This was why no one had ever wanted to be his friend, this was why the girls I liked used to like him instead. Because he always seemed to have the edge on you, always had dominion over your mind.

But when he told me he was scared, I believed him. I'd never heard him admit he was anything less than perfect. He was so scared tonight, he said, he'd felt the need to see my elderly grandmother after all these years. Just for a little comfort. I insisted again, I hadn't talked to her that week. I asked him what he was scared of, what did that mean?

He did something that made me afraid then, which is walk right past me without a word and go back into the house. I followed him. He just kept going. All the way through the living room, sensing his way through the dark, then through the front door, and out toward his Mercedes.

That was where he finally stopped and turned back to me. He told me to lock my door and not talk to strangers, not tonight. Then he got in his car and drove away. The smartest guy in town.

By midnight I was so tense listening to every sound inside this house that I couldn't stay here. I walked to the edge of the drive and stared down Halt Horse Road into the dark. On foot I went west, where the blacktop curved into the woods and stayed there for two miles. I wasn't

worried about a car coming the other way and clipping me. There was no chance of anyone being out.

To keep my mind flat as I could make it, I mentally recited the rules to ride the Devil's Wheel at Kennywood Park. I even mouthed the words. It was a trick I had to use sometimes to not remember what happened to me on that ride back in the day. That was the one where you went into a dark room with a strobe light going and stood against a wall and the whole room began to spin, spin so fast that at some point the floor fell away and all our bodies still clung to the wall. Centrifugal force. I had turned my head to my grandmother as we were whipped around and around. I saw her in bright alternating flashes of sticky, seeping neon blue and blinding white. Her eyes were wide and she was laughing at me, at how afraid I was. To me it was the end of the world.

The trees went by on Halt Horse Road; the steps accumulated beneath my old sneakers. I took a left on Sheepshead Lane, where I hadn't walked in years. The old farmhouse where they'd arrested some guy for hoarding weapons was still for sale. Millicent Pond was almost dry, filled with green murk.

The sign at the intersection of Sheepshead and Sargo Road had been tilted toward the woods for as long as I could remember; I think someone had once rammed into it on a Vespa. The road sloped down, curved to the right, and then opened up a little. And then, just past the corner where the old body shop used to be, I was looking at the old Magradnick & Brothers building, sitting all by itself, flanked by a couple of wooden light posts, only one of which was working. You could still see the ghost of the Magradnick name in elaborate cursive if you squinted hard enough at the cracked cement. No cars were in the lot, which was just pale gravel, room enough for maybe four of them.

It was funny, how I never even thought about the fence until Beady mentioned it. But yeah, there it was. Now the makeshift gate that had been cut out of it was halfway open. Like it was inviting me to come in, come in and see, a special pass in the middle of the night.

I trespassed once, when I was a boy, and never again. Trespassing was on the list of things that would make Grandma go to the shed and get the tripod.

I'd gotten close enough. I turned around. And I saw someone.

There was a man standing at the far edge of the property, near an old well, looking up at the moon, just like Beady had done. He was wearing a long coat and a scarf even though it was over seventy degrees. I tried to walk away before he could sense me. But before I could even get a step back down Sargo Road, he had turned.

I kept my head down and started walking. In a minute I was beyond the faint glow of the last street light and heading back toward where the trees would swallow me up. Not until I got to the intersection of Sargo and Sheepshead did I turn around.

He was following me, that man. Walking slowly along the faded double yellow line, not clinging to the shoulder like I was. I got just a glimpse of his shape and then quickened my pace.

I felt a little safer turning back onto Halt Horse past Millicent Pond. In the trees I heard rustlings like things were moving about, tracking me. At the top of the hill I turned my head and looked back again.

Here he came, that man, a tiny mass of darkness swallowed up in the night a hundred yards behind me. Even though I was walking fast and he was walking slow, he was somehow keeping up with me.

I started to jog, but there was no way I had the endurance to keep it up. Just a few minutes away from my house now. The road bent to the right. I saw a faint flash of heat lightning in the sky but heard no thunder. At the top of the last rise on Halt Horse Road, I made myself stop completely and look back one more time.

He was there, standing directly under a lamppost, not moving, just watching me go. For the first time in years, I broke into a run.

The clock on my living room wall said it was almost 1:30 when I got back inside. I was sweating, I was wiped out. I stood with my back against the door for a long time, which made it feel like I was banishing whatever might be out there somehow. I tensed up when I heard a police siren far away, but it never seemed to get any closer, and finally, it faded to nothing. I shook a match from the box on the coffee table into my hand, lit a candle, and went into the kitchen, then beyond it.

Deer had congregated in the back yard, six of them. Even when I came out the back door and stepped into the tall grass they didn't move, as if they had no fear of me at all, staring at me with pinprick eyes. I yelled at them to scam and waved my arms, and most of them did. But two stayed behind. They were staring each other down. I'd never seen that before. Then they charged at each other, right there in the back yard. I closed my eyes just before their heads collided and I heard a thin cracking sound.

Still holding the candle, I turned and yanked on the back door and hurried inside, feeling sick. I needed a cool place to sit and calm myself. I opened the cellar door and descended the wooden stairs. God, it was dark. The old place from childhood, a place of banishment, punishment, isolation. Days at a time. Odors of mold and dampness. I had just barely set my foot on the bottom step when I saw the candlelight catch someone sitting in a rocking chair in the middle of the cracked cement floor.

It was the man from Sargo Road. The black coat and scarf he wore only made sense here, in the subterranean coolness of the basement.

Before I could turn to run he assured me in a soothing voice that there was nothing to fear here, no harm. He only wanted to sit and rest for a while. He repeated his request a second and third time among my insistence that he had no right to be here, and that I was about to call the police to report an intruder. I was almost at the top of the staircase again when in that cultured and convincing voice he made mention of the building on Sargo Road, and what he wanted to describe to me about what he'd seen in there.

That was what kept me with him, turning and descending again slowly, though I stayed near the staircase, holding the candle just high enough to throw a sad yellow glow on the bottom of his bearded face from twenty feet away.

Yes, he had been inside, yes, he had seen things. But they had confused him, for while he saw many things which made him think it was a laboratory, how could the unsanitary conditions be excused? He didn't know how he had gotten there; the last thing my visitor remembered was being on a skiing holiday in a country far away, putting his skis into his car. And at some point everything had gone black as the repository of his memories seemed to collapse in on itself, its contents swirling down into a yawning pit without light or sound.

When he awoke, he was standing in the corner of a room inside that building on Sargo Road. He was looking at a man lying on a table, but that man was himself. He was looking at his own body. He had been cut very thoroughly and very precisely in two, his upper part and his bottom part pushed together like the two halves of a sandwich. His hands had been immersed in two shallow bowls. Elaborate designs had been scrawled all over his naked flesh in blue ink. This was what he saw.

It felt like the man was hypnotizing me somehow from a pre-determined script as he rocked gently back and forth in the chair.

For days, he said, he had stood there in the corner of the windowless room, watching scientists come and go in the hours before dawn, until it occurred to him that the weak corporeal structure he sensed was wrapped around his thoughts could be made to move. And so he did move. Out of the room, and out into the night. But not past the fence, no, because he was frightened to go too far away. And weren't those nameless people in the room shocked and dismayed when he was suddenly gone, for they had seen him all along, standing in that corner, and had just been waiting, waiting to see what he might do next.

They could not find him, though they looked everywhere. He'd enjoyed the game of hide and seek, enjoyed their fear, but finally the very last man in the building had run away, and the place became as lonely as any on Earth.

The creaks of the rocking chair stopped. The man's hands were clenched into fists. He had died on his skiing trip, he believed. He wasn't afraid anymore. He'd followed me because he had sensed a presence in this house, a faint trail of being. One that was like him, the way he was now.

A woman, he said. An old woman. Who was... angry.

He thought it might be better now to go back to Sargo Road, and wait in the dark for someone to return. In the next moment my candlelight fell only on an empty chair.

It started just a few minutes ago, the sound of someone singing upstairs, wafting through the pipes and the cracks in the floorboards. An old folk ballad she once used as a lullaby with my father. No matter how long I stand here in the dark, I know I have to go upstairs and face her and account for what I have done. It only means she's won again, as she always will, a laughing incarcerator slamming door after door in the chambers of my ruined heart.

Oh where, tell me where, has your highland laddie gone?

*He's gone with streaming banners where noble deeds are done,
And it's oh, in my heart I wish him safe at home.*

project

Marvin Minchlin hated his job. Working for the government's Department of Divergent Projects, he had to drive all over the west making sure its scientists were spending the department's money responsibly... but he wasn't supposed to ask too many questions, because the projects were all top secret. Sometimes they were for the military, but sometimes they seemed designed just to test the scary limits of human knowledge.

Late on a Sunday night, Minchlin found himself guiding his car into desolate Compound 40 at the base of a shadowy mountain range. He had been ordered by his superiors to find out what he could about an unusual room that had been constructed by an old scientist named Zaft. They'd forced him to sign yet another statement of lifetime confidentiality beforehand.

Absolutely no one was around in Compound 40, which Minchlin thought was a little strange. A mysterious floor plan had been taped to the entrance of Research Building C, and a handwritten note said:

Mr. Minchlin:

I understand you will be arriving tonight. Please use this map to proceed to Room 16-Q7, as marked. Enter it and wait for further instruction.

- Dr. Artis Zaft

Minchlin entered the building, then descended below the ground and through a long series of empty twisting corridors. Some of them weren't even lit. One last elevator seemed to take him so far down that he began to sweat a little at the thought of his isolation.

At the end of one last hallway, he opened an unmarked black door and entered Room 16-Q7, which was nothing more than a big empty space, sort of like a gymnasium. He walked to its center.

As he stood there, waiting, he heard the door shutting behind him. An old man in a lab coat, hunched over from age and overwork, was trying to seal him in!

"Hey!" Minchlin cried, but he was too late to react and the door went *thunk*.

A moment later, all the ceiling lights in Room 16-Q7 went out at once and he was plunged into darkness.

"Forgive me," came Dr. Zaft's elderly voice through a speaker high above Minchlin. "But this is the only way I can demonstrate my very special room."

"Explain yourself please!" Minchlin yelled, disoriented.

"I'm not very comfortable in here!"

"Yes, yes," Zaft replied. "You see, my superiors asked me last year if it was possible to somehow create darkness out of nothing, turn it into a substance that could be carried and wielded like a weapon. They thought perhaps we could confuse enemies on the battlefield if we could. So I devised a kind of ... *synthetic* darkness. In a moment, you will feel and sense it all around you."

There was a *cha-chunk!* sound from somewhere, and Minchlin heard something sighing through the vents all around him. As he continued loudly complaining to Zaft about this highly irregular demonstration, he became aware of true, coal-like blackness appearing in little clouds at various parts of the huge room. They swirled and merged, and within seconds, they were surrounding him. He had been able to see almost nothing around him since the lights had gone out, but now ... now he couldn't even see his hand in front of his face no matter how close he held it there. He yelled out something about disrespect for his status, but Zaft seemed not to hear.

"No light can penetrate my darkness more than a fraction of a millimeter," Zaft's voice croaked through the speaker. "You are now in the darkest place man has ever known. In a moment I'll stop speaking, and you'll also be in the *quietest* place ever known, due to the layers upon layers of unique soundproofing within the walls. You'll be able to hear your blood coursing through your veins. You'll be able to hear the creaking of your own bones."

"Enough of this!" Minchlin protested, turning around and around, trying to sense any kind of visual stimuli around him but unable. "I can't take it!"

"Yes, you may just go a little mad," Zaft continued. "Most of my previous test subjects have. But you see, the real problem for you is that after a year's successful testing of the room, a very odd phenomenon occurred. Something unknown decided that the environment in there was most inviting. Something that seems to crave, to *thirst* for, a place completely without light and without sound. It simply comes when it wants to, and it vanishes the second I turn the lights on again. From where it comes, I do not know ... but I am sure it's not of our world."

Minchlin gulped and waved his arms frantically, trying to beat the synthetic darkness off, which felt dry and gooey at the same time against his skin. But it was everywhere.

"Perhaps when I open the door again tomorrow morning," Zaft concluded through the speaker, "you'll emerge, Mr. Minchlin. No one's made it out alive yet... but perhaps *you* will. Goodnight."

The speaker went dead.

Minchlin began to panic. He could hear his eyelids open and close. He could hear his blood rushing to his heart. His own breath was deafening in this lightless void. His continued cries of protest went unanswered, and so he stopped.

He decided he would close his eyes and lie down to try to calm himself. But in the utter absence of light and sound, it felt like he was floating in an awful black space, disconnected from all human things, far away from safety.

Within a half hour, his tortured mind lost hold on reality. It felt like he could hear even his own thoughts swirling through his muddled brain. The darkness clutched him tight.

Then, two hours after Zaft sealed him into Room 16-Q7, Minchlin finally heard something. But no, that wasn't right. It wasn't *sound* that came. It was just a *feeling*, a *sense*. Something very large, shifting and ... *unfurling* in one corner of the room.

The air became cold around him, but he felt no draft. He rolled over and pressed his face into the tile floor for comfort, but comfort did not come.

He sensed a thick, wet moaning all around. Above him. To the side. Even below the floor. Even *inside his clothes*.

The thing in the perfect darkness swallowed him whole.

Down the hall, Dr. Zaft monitored the proceedings on a digital readout that measured the room's decibel level, temperature, and physical activity. Well past midnight, he drained Room 16-Q7 of the synthetic darkness and turned the lights back on.

The room was utterly empty. Minchlin was gone.

Dr. Zaft yawned. Then he went outside to hide his visitor's car in the woods. After that, he called his superiors and asked why Mr. Minchlin had never shown up that night.

The belly of the awful thing that sometimes came to Room 16-Q7 from an unseen realm was full for now. It waited for the old scientist to make the lovely darkness and silence return again. There were tasty things there, and it was always oh so hungry.

Maybe, though, just maybe, there were things in the *light* that might be worth eating...?

vision

My name is John Gray. I was once chief evidence analyst with the Oregon State Police. A half hour past sunset on September 7th of 2013, a volunteer at the visitor's center inside the Qualls Nature Education Park on the edge of the Columbia River Gorge in northern Oregon locked the building and prepared to go home for the night. She was Elaine Mossworth, age sixty. As she closed the doors, she scanned the small parking lot, and she was surprised to see another vehicle besides her own. It was a dark red SUV. She knew it belonged to a man who came to the park often on late afternoons to catch the sunset from the main overlook, but now it was dark, and she wasn't permitted to leave the grounds unless they were empty of visitors. Before she put in a call to the part-time security guard, she decided she would take a quick walk to the overlook to see if the man, whose name escaped her, was there and just straggling longer than he ever had before.

Elaine went back into the building and got a flashlight. She would have to walk a few hundred feet down Blue Robin Trail to the overlook, and suddenly she felt a heightened awareness of her solitude on the park's heavily wooded thirty-acre grounds. They fed the gorge and forest around her through five different trail systems. The overlook was absolutely as far as she was willing to go before calling the guard. She started down the unlit path into the woods a little nervously. A woman camper had been murdered not three miles from this spot, six years before—the very same woman who had overseen the renovation of the visitor's center in 2004. The path wound toward a steadily trickling small stream; Elaine could hear it, but she couldn't see it. When she turned around she saw that even the small aura of light from the parking lot had been completely blotted out by the trees. The overlook bordered a dramatic drop into a wide, tree-choked valley bordering the river. The horizon was a dark purple, and stars were now gleaming through tiny gaps in the clouds.

Several benches ringed the overlook's edge, and Elaine noticed a form sitting on one of them. A man, sitting in the dark. As she approached him, Elaine suddenly remembered the name of the man who she hoped this was, and she called it out, but there was no response. Before getting too close, she pointed the flashlight directly at his face, and she recognized the park's frequent visitor right away. He was staring past Elaine, but his eyes were motionless and unresponsive. Moving in front of him didn't cause his eyes to follow. His breathing was calm and even; his chest was rising and falling normally. Elaine placed a hand on his arm; he didn't react to it. She dared to shake him, saying his name again and again, but she may as well have been shaking a doll. Strangest of all, his face bore several thin black marks that looped and crossed on his cheeks and forehead, later found to be from a felt-tipped pen he'd had in his shirt pocket.

It was then that he slowly raised his right hand with great, ponderous effort. After being held there for a moment, it then dropped all at once to the wooden bench with a thunk. Elaine was crying now; she got on her cellphone and called 911, and she told them a man was hurt and immobilized in the park, maybe a stroke victim. When she disconnected, she noticed something was beside him on the bench. It was the remains of a paperback novel. For some reason it had been torn in half along the spine, then again and again and again, and the man's left hand held some loose pages very tightly. Elaine couldn't do anything but touch his arm and keep watch as the man with the marked face remained catatonic, the wind blowing his hair around his head, his eyes watery and unblinking in the silence of the woods.

That man was me. They had to lift me off that bench to get me to the hospital. I remained in that twilight state, defenseless and unaware, for six full days before I began to recover. My vital signs

were all completely normal throughout. I had suffered no stroke, no visible injuries. After all that nothingness, my recovery began with images in my mind of my mother dressing me for school on a winter's day. My eyes began to follow people around the hospital room, and I slept less. Coherent thought returned on day seven, and speech the next. By the ninth day after they found me on the bench, I was speaking and behaving normally. My last memory was of pulling into the parking lot of the nature center a half hour before sunset, intent on a quick hike down the shortest trail after a twelve-hour day at work, and maybe a bit of reading. Then, it all went black. If anyone else had been on the overlook with me, no one ever came forward to say. The only fingerprints on the pen that had marked my face were my own. I'd done that to myself.

They told me it was dissociative amnesia, the type most often seen after a traumatic event, though mine had been more pronounced and warranted further caution and observation. But there was little more they could do for me. They'd completed an embarrassingly thorough physical examination but found no injuries of any kind. A CAT scan revealed nothing either. Blood tests were negative for evidence of insinuated drugs. They ruled out even a brief concussion resulting from a fall. I was given any number of options for private therapy to get my bearings back, and I paid to have more brain tests done than I even should have. After I met with my department chief, it was decided that I would take some leave from my work. I welcomed it, feeling wholly unfit, worried I might unexpectedly slip back into that fugue.

It was on the third night of that leave that I got a call from the estranged ex-wife of an old acquaintance of mine, Doug Knorr. Her name was Kelly; she was worried because Doug hadn't shown up that weekend to take their teenaged son to the movies, and wasn't answering his cellphone. Doug was nothing if not reliable. Kelly thought he had mentioned going out to his small cabin on the north side of the river gorge for the weekend prior to this one. She asked if I could possibly drive out there, about twenty miles north of my townhouse, and check to see if he was there; I was the only friend she'd ever spoken to who'd been out to the cabin before. Kelly had no idea what had just happened to me, and I wasn't about to explain it to her. I said yes, I'd go out there, of course I would. I immediately felt that pang of sick fear we all get when we hear that suddenly, someone we know has gone totally, mysteriously dark.

I hadn't talked to Doug in almost a year, and I just barely remembered the way to take to get out to the cabin. The country roads became progressively steeper as the hills became more scenic, and then there was an indifferently maintained state route winding up past summer tourist cabins to lesser known areas, coyote country. I passed almost no one as I climbed and climbed. After my catatonia, and now this suddenly on top of it, it felt like my life itself had taken a very strange road. I'd always been a nature lover and clung to wild places, but driving up that road, I could almost see it as outsiders often do, as a path into dark, uncaring, even hostile territory. It gave me no comfort now. Something about it had changed for me permanently.

My final turn was onto a bumpy dirt path winding between rows of trees crowding in on the car. Two hundred yards down, there in the glow of my headlights was the cabin in a clearing, a little wreck of a place suitable only for drinking and telling stories before going out hiking or hunting. I felt a surge of relief when I saw right away that Doug's Land Rover was sitting there in the dead grass, and there was a light on inside the cabin. But something about that one light on in there struck me as meaningless. It wasn't the warm glow of a desk lamp, but a single ugly uncovered ceiling bulb, the kind of light I associated with crime scenes I'd worked in slum apartments, crack dens, and also of grim interrogation rooms or that dank corridor where a

corpse might wait before being rolled into the state forensics lab for an autopsy. When I parked my car and killed the engine, I considered taking my old service revolver out of the glove compartment, but I didn't do it, ashamed and confused at my sudden weak stomach for mystery. I walked up onto the creaking front porch. There was no answer when I called out Doug's name. The cabin was unlocked.

The interior was just like I remembered it: one large room with an efficiency kitchenette, a bed in one corner beside the front door, a very small bathroom whose plumbing Doug was always working on toward the back. The overhead bulb hung from a chain that dangled all the way down to my head. The first warning of a real problem was a foul smell. I closed the door behind me, feeling exposed and unnerved by the wind. There were dishes in the sink, a large backpack on the floor, clothes on the unmade bed. On the table near the kitchenette was a half-wrapped collection of Deer Park water bottles. Empties were all over the floor, maybe a dozen of them, not thrown into the trash, but littered everywhere. I walked over to the bathroom, rapped on it once, opened it. No one inside. That was when I heard a slight shifting sound from behind me. I turned and saw nothing, but then it came again, and my eyes went downward. Something was under the bed. It moved again. Slowly I crouched, tilting my head.

There was a man under there, flat on his stomach in the dark. He was slowly making his way out into the light, crawling like an insect. A hand appeared from under the bed, then an arm. I moved very cautiously forward. Finally Doug Knorr came fully out. He still did not respond when I spoke his name. He was wobbly as he staggered to his feet, like a boxer after having taken punch after punch to the head.

His condition was dire. He was unshaven, thin, and deathly pale, and he looked like he had suddenly lost a lot of weight, but it was his expression that was truly alarming. His eyes were bloodshot and wide, his mouth hanging open idiotically, his eyebrows furrowed severely as if experiencing an all-consuming silent rage. All at once, Doug lunged at me. Before I could react he had slammed his hand down on top of my head, grabbing a handful of hair. I shouted at him to stop, but he wrenched my neck forward and brought his free hand down on it with a closed fist. My knees buckled and I fell to the floor; he never let go. Before I could rise to my feet, he dropped hard beside me, and with that same crazed expression still on his face, he lifted his left arm high, preparing to bring it down again. I lashed out with my leg, dodging his blow, and the second he lost his grip on my hair I rose and shoved him backwards. His head struck the floorboards, empty water bottles skittered in all directions, and just like that, he lost consciousness, his body going completely limp. In his weakened state he couldn't take even the slightest blow. It took twenty minutes for help to arrive.

Doug was catatonic for another day or two. From what he later described as his last memory, which was walking through the woods nearby on the first night he'd arrived, listening to his iPod, he'd been in the cabin for almost two weeks, keeping himself hydrated by drinking bottled water but eating very little of the food he had brought with him, as if its preparation were beyond his capabilities. Like me, he'd suffered no visible injuries. Like me, tests and a CAT scan told the doctors nothing they could truly work with. He was kept under observation for a while and was left with nothing but the mystery of what had happened. For both of us, the most undeniable fact was that we seemed to have been afflicted on the same evening, separated by just a few miles.

During my leave I used the resources available to me as a member of the police department to rather aggressively contact area hospitals, inquiring about similar cases that had occurred in

the same time frame. But I wasn't able to come up with any truly workable information, even when I expanded the radius of my inquiries. There was a borderline case of a woman found by the side of the road near Seneca Fouts State Park on the very same night I was discovered. Seneca Fouts was on the other side of the gorge, a good twelve miles from the nature center. She had some of the same symptoms, but it was thought her brief catatonia was brought about by a bad mix of medications she was taking for schizophrenia.

I thought I was going to be all right, I really did. I told myself that people who endured severe car crashes or other traumas often had their memories blacked out, and it was for their protection, but this was different. Those people were informed of what had happened to them. For me, for Doug Knorr, that awful gap would never be explained. I found myself on edge and nervous every night before sunset, needing to get up and leave the house, going out into the cold just to get moving. But when I did this I got scared and didn't feel safe unless I was ensconced in my car. I decided I would enroll in therapy but wasn't sure what I needed. Reading about catatonia and amnesia just confused and depressed me. I called Doug a couple of times. He was dealing with the same issues more or less, though his symptoms of ill ease took another, even stranger form, which he told me about very reluctantly: he had been running the clothes dryer in his house for hours each day since he'd left the hospital because that particular sound calmed him down. At the end of our last talk he told me politely but firmly that this would be the last time he wanted to discuss what had happened with anyone.

I entered a period of fruitless web research, trying to click my way to understanding dissociative amnesia. That research ended at a very specific moment. On my laptop in the middle of the night, I was working my way through a list of links I'd stumbled across, a list on an otherwise featureless Web page apparently set up as part of someone's master's thesis on doctor and patient interactions during long-term psychiatric care. Clicking on one of the links brought up a page covered in Japanese text, indecipherable to me, but in the center of it a fuzzy video began to play. The time code on it dated it June 7th of 1984. I began to watch a therapist's attempt to draw out a hopelessly insane young woman as she sat at a table with an untouched Diet Coke in front of her. Her name was Albertine. She and the therapist spoke in French, of which I knew just enough to follow along. The colors on the tape were faded, and it was damaged in several spots. Albertine was either totally silent under questioning or she would ramble on and on about a lost bicycle until she had to be interrupted. Something had happened to her recently; she had apparently been unconscious for a month. The therapist tried several times to get her to repeat what she'd said once about what she saw before she 'went to sleep.' Albertine was evasive until the therapist basically threatened her with isolation. At that point she was silent for a moment, and then said, very matter-of-factly, 'J'ai vu le Diable.' Meaning, 'I saw the Devil.' I stopped the video at that exact moment. I didn't want to know anymore. I left my laptop on my dining room table and got ready for bed. Yet I was drawn back. It was only a half hour later of lying awake that I got up, walked back through my dark house toward the glow of the computer screen, and sat down in front of it again. After a moment's hesitation, I clicked play so the video would resume. It did—but only for a couple of seconds, and then the tape broke up. The original recording had simply ended after Albertine's strange statement.

During my sixth and final week of leave, I got an email from someone I didn't know named Clark Poole. He introduced himself as someone who'd formed a support group for locals who had suffered dissociative amnesia. This Clark wrote that a colleague of mine had given my name to him. That could have been almost anyone, so I didn't worry about it just then. The next meeting

of this support group would be in Portland in five days, and I was being invited to come and share my experience and meet others like me. Despite the email's unknown origins, I was tempted to go.

I thought I knew the city very well, but the group met in a neighborhood on the industrial side of the Willamette River I didn't have many dealings with; to call it working class would have been a kindness. At eight o'clock on a Monday night I parked on the street near a grungy apartment complex. Clark Poole had sent me a door code for the building, and I let myself into a dimly lit lobby with a mostly empty vending machine in one corner. I looked for a door leading downstairs and I took it, casting an eye on a bit of graffiti someone had scrawled on the staircase. Obviously no one was coming along to clean it away anytime soon. The heavy door boomed behind me. I went down one flight and came out into a long, silent hallway. A couple of the numbers on the apartment doors had faded to almost nothing and had to be written over in marker. I walked all the way down into an open room, the building's rec room, whose décor consisted of an old sofa, a ping pong table, and two card tables. Clark Poole was there alone, sitting at one of those. He got up and greeted me.

He was short and balding, but muscular, about my age, forty or so, with a face that seemed familiar. Although I was ten minutes late, no one else was there yet. We sat down. In front of him was what looked like a thick notebook augmented and overstuffed with extraneous contents. I asked him who had recommended me for the group, and he gave me a name that I almost didn't place at first and only recalled faintly as someone who worked in the property department in Gresham. That confused me. Clark immediately changed the subject before I could follow up, asking me if in the course of my work I had ever encountered anyone who had experienced what I had. I didn't mention Doug. He spoke like he wrote his emails, in a flat tone without any real personality but with unusual pauses, as if he were constantly trying to catch up with his own thoughts.

He asked me to indulge him in his own theory of my affliction, for he too had blacked out for six days as a teenager, twenty-six years before. He wanted me to accept as a premise that we had both been driven insane, lost our minds; after all, this was a clinical fact, just not traditionally defined that way. What then, he wondered, could cause a sane human mind to snap spontaneously, without warning, and snap so badly that it had rendered us immediately mute, our minds blacking us out for days to protect us? Because emotional trauma was never enough to cause such a catastrophic event; humans were capable of witnessing murder, genocide, the violent death of a loved one, and yet still remain conscious and functional. What if we had heard something, seen something, somehow *worse* than all that? Would *anything* be terrifying enough to break us, send us skittering into the darkness of our own subconscious?

I was mostly silent as Clark went on. Every sentence he spoke further drew a picture of what some of us in the police department called a mummy, meaning someone of limited social skills whose very specific type of verbal cadence revealed a damaged upbringing. Often, I'd found, these vocal patterns lay on the surface of a borderline criminal or even sociopathic personality. Still no one else came into the room for the meeting. Imagine, Clark said to me, imagine just for a moment what could be beheld by our eyes to do that to us. It would have to be something that not only promised the absolute certainty of our imminent death—we could survive even that with our minds intact—but the certainty that death would not be the end of our pain, that we were in fact staring at something that represented fears that went far deeper, fears that there could and would be punishment for our *souls*, eternal punishment, beginning in that instant. Imagine all that certainty pouring into us in one second, after a lifetime of having tried to deny such a damnation could be real. But there it was before us, in the flesh, revealing itself by

accident or by design. Maybe *that* could destroy our sanity in the blink of an eye. Maybe that could.

Clark turned to the notebook before him and opened it. It was mostly a collection of assembled doctor's notes about specific catatonia patients. I asked Clark how he'd gained access to them. He gave me an odd smile and said it had not been easy, but once certain password information was acquired, he'd been on his way. He wanted me to go through the notebook and read everything—the notes, the newspaper clippings. There was so much more research that needed to be done, and that where I could be of immense help, I as someone who could ask questions of people and go places where others weren't welcome. My badge could be of great use.

I opened the notebook to a random place near the beginning. What I saw first was a photocopy or perhaps a computer scan of a letter written in hand, dated March 7, 1950. I turned a few pages. I then found myself looking at a long handwritten list of names. I asked Clark who these people were. He told me this was a table of contents of sorts, a list of the names of those whose cases he'd managed to fully document. As he spoke I took many of those names in; there looked to be almost a hundred of them. And I saw my own name near the bottom: John Gray. Clark said, 'If it makes you feel better, I'm on there too,' and he pointed himself out. The handwriting that spelled out his name made something click for me vividly and terribly, and that instant mental connection decided my course of action.

Yes, I told him, I would take the notebook, and read it, and think about whether I could be of help. I was telling him exactly what I thought he wanted to hear in order to protect myself, in order to leave that room without him suspecting I was inwardly scared to be sitting across from a man who was only walking free because of a legal loophole instead of being locked away where he couldn't kill anyone else. In my trepidation I wasn't as convincing as I needed to be. I could see in Clark Poole's eyes that he wasn't sure whether to believe me. Working hard to create the illusion of calm, I added that once I would have refused to accept anything I couldn't prove, but the catatonia had forced me to turn anywhere I could for answers. I told him I might not be able to help him at all, but I was definitely curious about what had happened to others like me. This he seemed to accept. I even sat there longer, asking for a detail or two about his own incident, and volunteering a few of mine, to steady my nerves and make it seem like I was on his side.

Our meeting ended with me taking his heavy notebook and heading toward the door. I said I would send him an email in about three days. He stood and watched me go. The urge to look back as I walked down that dimly lit hallway toward the door that would lead me back up to the lobby was immense. No residents came out of their rooms; there was not a sound but my own footsteps on the tile. I pushed on the door and was soon back out into the night. Clark Poole, whose real name, I knew the instant I saw his handwriting, was Christopher Pondehill, did not try to stop me, did not try to attack me. He was much heavier and stronger than he'd appeared in old photographs, when he'd had long hair and glasses.

I drove not back to my house but directly to Portland's north precinct. I got there at 9:30. To my good fortune, detective Toby Eklund was in his office, working, and it was directly to him that I gave Christopher Pondehill's notebook. Toby had been involved in assembling the original murder case against him eight years before. I told Toby that maybe the notebook had information that might be of some use if there were ever a retrial, or an attempt right now to put him away for something else, at least possibly evidence that Pondehill had illegal access to private computer networks in which were stored patient files. Toby would start to go through it right away.

It was almost six years to the night that a judge had declared a mistrial in Pondehill's court case before it even truly began because of alleged misconduct by the prosecutor, who had been so overzealous in trying to put the man behind bars that I believe he tampered with key evidence. At any rate, if you had any direct dealings with Portland investigators since 2006, you were likely convinced that Pondehill had killed his father one cold December night in what appeared to be an attempt to get at the old man's meager assets, claiming the man had gone off to seek treatment for a rare blood disease and disappeared somewhere en route to Chicago. But there was evidence Pondehill, of no fixed address or occupation at the time, occasionally in prison for burglary, assault, and defacing of public property, had researched methods of hanging in the weeks leading up to the vanishing.

My one real contribution to the investigation had been the examination of a piece of receipt tape marked on the back by Pondehill's distinctive handwriting bearing two words followed by a disturbing and incriminating phrase. The words were *steel wire*, and the phrase was *best to separate the head from the body*. This man was now free among us. It was agreed that the book would be copied to the best extent possible, and three days from now I would send an email to Pondehill telling him I would FedEx it back to him and contact him again when I felt up to it. Or if there was enough evidence to make an outright arrest on new charges right now, I'd set up a meeting. Until then, Toby suggested I set up in a hotel, because who knew how much information Pondehill had about me, my phone number, my address?

It turned out he had quite a bit. I didn't go to a hotel, and two nights later the phone on my night table rang at a little past eleven o'clock. The voice on the other end of the line was Christopher Pondehill's. He was very direct. He told me he was disappointed that I had turned the notebook over to others. And so he knew already. Maybe Toby had been too aggressive with it, had made a premature move. I sat up in bed, becoming very aware of how alone I was in my house, despite the fact I had made sure to test my security system. I claimed ignorance, but it didn't work, of course. Pondehill acknowledged I had a job to do, that I was bound. He said that he only wished I had bothered to read the book's contents first. For if I had, he said, I would have realized how many of the brains of the afflicted amnesiacs described within it contained deeply unusual levels of ferrous oxide, the substance that aided navigation in birds, and that made me and the other victims extremely sensitive to changes in the earth's magnetic fields. It also slowly altered the structure of the mind's pineal gland, referred to in some Eastern philosophies as the third eye, the seat of the soul. Pondehill told me that he had left me something in the place where he'd been living, something very big, if I wanted to come see it. He then spoke an address that was not the apartment building where I'd met him, and wished me a good night. And he hung up the phone.

Toby Eklund and I went together to the new location just ninety minutes later, after he'd quickly secured a search warrant. We drove through the city through a light rain. He cursed himself for too soon making a single contact based on what he'd read in Pondehill's notebook. Maybe it had been enough to tip the man off, or maybe he'd simply sensed from my behavior in that fetid basement that I was lying to him. I pinpointed the address Pondehill had spoken and was afraid I'd misheard it, for it was a junior high school about twelve blocks from the apartment building where I'd met him. Toby knew of it; it had been abandoned more than two years before, its students transferred to a more modern building after an outcry about the poor conditions. This one had been left to go to ruin until someone bought the land.

The neighborhood where Middle Tree Junior High School lay bordered one of the city's more blighted areas, and so in its abandoned state, it had taken on a good deal of graffiti and vandalism. It was a T-shaped, single-story building, windows stoutly boarded up since 2012. Toby swung the squad car into the bus drop-off zone of the front parking lot, which was the least visible spot, facing only two auto warehouses across the street. Our plan was to check out the exterior all the way around for an easy way in, and if there was none, Toby had equipment in the trunk to break whatever locks we needed to. The school's main entrance was firmly sealed, but we pulled on each door anyway in case any of the visible locks had been broken and carefully reattached to give the appearance of permanence. Toby went around the east side of the school, and I went around the west, walking down a natural footpath worn into being by the students who had once gone here. Looking to my left across D Street, I saw a line of silent row houses. Sitting in a rocking chair on one of the dilapidated front porches was an old woman, smoking and watching me.

My cellphone chimed; Toby had already found a way in on the other side. I jogged back around the front and turned the corner. I saw his silhouette a hundred feet down, holding a door open. There was a little more illumination on this side coming from lights attached to the adjacent, crumbling pulp mill whose acreage stretched more than a half-mile, forming a lonely ghost town navigable by a grid of meaningless streets with meaningless names. Toby told me quietly that the door had been neither locked nor barricaded in any way. We both turned on our flashlights and went in. The air was stale and heavy, with an odor of spoiled fruit. One step inside, Toby turned around and pointed his beam just to our left. A homemade deadbolt had been fashioned to keep intruders out, something clumsy but large and effective—except tonight it had been left unfastened. Toby closed the door behind us, sealing us in total darkness. He got on his radio and informed his partner, waiting ten blocks away in an all-night diner, exactly where we were. I could hear the man over a burst of static acknowledge the report.

We were in a very short hallway that fed into the building's main one. Toby told me to keep an eye on whatever was behind us as we moved. He drew his gun and kept it low and loose to his side. Five feet shy of the T-corner, he stopped entirely and we merely listened. The beams of our flashlights would have given us away to anyone watching us from down the hall, so we waited for an audible sign of movement. And waited. None came. Finally Toby pressed himself against the near wall and leaned his head around, looking to the left and holding that position for such a long time that I was certain he must have spotted something. But no. The hallway had locker banks on both sides stretching each way. My beam picked up random graffiti strewn across them. The filthy floor was streaked with dirt and sawdust. Walking to the north, I stepped on an empty bag from a local doughnut shop, and then a little further down I trampled the eight of hearts from some otherwise missing deck of playing cards.

It was I who suggested to Toby we split up, and he nodded agreement. And so it was I alone who found the contents of room 41. It was just around the next T-corner, the door open, almost as if I were being invited in. All the other classroom doors were sealed tight but that one. From the moment I entered I gave Toby a running commentary over the radio of what I was seeing while he covered the rest of the building, making absolutely sure we were alone.

Christopher Pondehill had been living in room 41. Scattered around where there had once been desks and chairs were remnants of a transient's existence. A beanbag chair in one corner was probably where he slept at night. Several books were stacked near it, a random assortment that included a book on the Battle of Stalingrad, a consumer medical manual, and one outlier called *Transitions From the Unreal*, an unusually academic study of the paranormal taken from the library at the University of Chicago. A cardboard box on a long counter held what remained of

Pondehill's short-term food supplies. Beside that, something more unusual: three buckets of black paint, all of them open and half-full. The classroom's windows were still unbroken, protected by the heavy boards that covered them from the outside and blocked virtually all daylight. His notebooks, some filled, some empty, were on a large teacher's desk that had never been removed. There were more than a dozen such notebooks, and beside those, a laptop computer. Pondehill leaving all this behind for us was a clear sign he was giving up somehow, ready to be apprehended.

Even the contents of that computer, however, turned out to be not as telling as the one object that lay against the wall near the door to room 41. The very first photograph taken of this object as it appeared in a police officer's flashlight beam less than a half hour later would be reprinted as the cover of a true crime book published a year later, the color digitally stripped away and the film grain intensified for effect. It was the fingerprints on this object that forensic scientists would use to connect it to Christopher Pondehill and ultimately show how it had been used in relation not only to the burial of his father, but the burial of eleven other human beings in the years 2008 to 2013. It was a shovel whose blade was still stained with the dirt of all those graves, stretching from Hood River to Lincoln City. And I, John Gray, was the first to see it.

The moment I informed Toby over the radio of the presence of that shovel, he told me he was going to call in for backup, as if he sensed it had a meaning. He suggested I stay where I was; he intended only to look into the gymnasium and then sit tight and play it safe. But after a moment of sitting tight I decided I didn't like the idea of Toby going into a space that large alone. So I left room 41 and navigated through the dark down the hallway. Large droplets of paint, dark blue paint, had spattered in the hall in a wavy line. I knelt and touched the largest of these droplets, the size of a pancake, and I found that it was not completely dry. Almost, just not quite. I got on the radio, and I warned Toby that it was impossible to rule out that Pondehill was still here somewhere.

I turned right at the end of the hallway. Casting the beam into the distance, I saw Toby, seeming small and insignificant, raise his own flashlight to make sure it was me coming around that corner. He waved me down to him. I picked up my pace. He was standing before three tall doors. Above them, letters on a large rectangular copper plate, now scratched and faded, told us it was the Roberta Neal Memorial Gymnasium.

Almost reading my mind, Toby whispered that he'd decided to wait for either me or the backup; it was too big a space to feel safe about. Two of the doors were chain-locked—no way in—but the third was almost utterly destroyed, hacked at by an axe or sledgehammer until a hole more than big enough for a man to fit through had been made. Splinters of wood of various sizes lay on the floor, as did most of the metal push-bar that had once been rooted in place. This time I went first, stepping high and through the door's remains, sucking old, lifeless air into my lungs. I waited for Toby to step through before I even raised the flashlight. It threw a glow across a floor crisscrossed all the way to its end with peeling colored tape to represent boundaries for various sports. On the floor were some objects that seemed to have been recently placed: a very large metal extension ladder, a couple of camping lanterns, and again, even more cans of paint of various colors. The beam finally rested on a wall of wooden bleachers, which gave us a feel for the sheer size of the room.

I then turned my body to shine the beam against the wall about seventy-five feet to my left. The north wall of the gym had once been painted white, but it had been altered dramatically since then. Someone had been working on it, an effort of days, maybe weeks. I moved the beam of the flashlight all the way across the wall and back again before realizing I was only seeing a part of the work that had been done. Tilting the beam upward, I saw ever more detail, until my eyes

came to rest on the aspect of the work that made it cohere instantly in my mind. And how horrible it must have been at that moment to be Toby Eklund and be standing within ten feet of me, facing in a different direction, and hearing a grown man who you've known for twelve years begin to shriek into the darkness at the top of his lungs, the shriek of a man losing his mind, screams echoing off the gymnasium walls as if I were being killed—which I was in a way, coming apart psychologically until what was left of me had to be taken away by the police and brought to the city's crisis assessment and treatment center.

Christopher Pondehill, whose body they found curled behind the bleachers after having shot himself in the head, had worked tirelessly not just to show me what he had seen as a 16-year-old boy as he sat alone before dawn on the shore of eastern Maryland's Chesapeake Bay. He'd created a clumsy, massive mural spanning the entire north wall of the gymnasium so he could show the entire world what he'd somehow remembered. The lower two-thirds of the mural was a series of cross-hatchings depicting a distant treeline, winter trees with no leaves, skeletal and crowding into each other. And looming behind that treeline, in relief against a dark blue field representing deepest night, was a monstrous presence ill-defined by Pondehill's desperate paint strokes in the filthy lantern-lit gymnasium. Toby and the police who arrived afterward would be hard-pressed to say that yes, this was the thing's head and torso, gigantic above the woods, connected to a lower body obscured by them, but I could see it all, including the enormous face Pondehill had depicted in wisps and streaks of red, and the long ropy arms that seemed to go on forever, the indefinable shapes they ended in, and the way they seemed to reach out toward me specifically even as they yearned to encircle the earth itself.

Photographs of that wall have been reprinted in every book about Pondehill's crimes. To most, the mural seems like nothing more than a crazed but effective portrait of one man's paranoid delusions. To me it was a rusty dagger to the mind, a revelation of what I and a handful of others had been cursed to see, to actually *see*, for the briefest of milliseconds: what has towered above humanity since before the beginning of time. He is visible only in the briefest of instances on wide horizons, when the heavens align just so and minds with damaged structures perceive the one true father of darkness, evil, and madness before the light inside them dies forever.

plague

My name is Farley Shawn. I'm writing this in Blue Terrace, Idaho. Tonight I'm sitting in the apartment I've lived in for seven years, working by candlelight, but tomorrow I'll finally move on. Almost everyone here is dead. If I were to walk outside my apartment building right now and go out into the street, I would still be able to see stains on the pavement where people bled out over the past six weeks. There's no one to clean up the blood anymore.

Blue Terrace is where it all began. This can be proved simply by looking through news articles from two years ago. Blue Terrace was where the mold was first seen. For all I know, I was the first human on earth to see it. When I walked out onto my balcony one day in July to check on a tomato plant my mother had given me, I noticed the mold growing on the side of the pot. It was

a strange color, a brownish green. It would first register in your mind as brown, but when you looked at it long enough, there was the green. I mentioned it to my roommate, but he didn't know anything about gardening.

I put my finger into the mold. It felt gritty, grittier than dirt that's completely dry. It had no moisture to it at all. It clung to the side of the pot, and it covered five square inches or so. Then I noticed a little of it on the balcony itself, near the very edge of it, growing right there on the cement. I thought of it as mold, but even then I had doubts. A day after observing it on the tomato plant, I saw some of it on one of the handlebars of my racing bike. I tried to brush it away, but it held fast. I had to chip away at it with the bottom of a comb until it flaked away almost entirely. That was another strange thing about the substance. It left no trace of itself behind like mold would. If you could manage to chip it away, it would all be gone, every bit of it.

I read about the substance in the newspaper a week later. Some reader wrote in to the expert who wrote for the gardening section and mentioned it growing on corn stalks. The expert referred to it by some name, but I knew right away he had gotten it wrong. A week after that, there was an article in the metro section called 'What could it be?' The substance had been found growing slowly on all sorts of surfaces in Blue Terrace, especially inside buildings, on walls. Inside the hospital, the high school, the Lutheran church right down the block from me. It was quickly chipped away and people just found it to be an irritant, but no one could claim to really understand its nature. When it was analyzed, it was found to be a lot like moss, but able to grow with only a minimal amount of moisture in the air. It was living plant life, an unusual form of it, but nothing alarming.

What was strange was that it could grow on anything. You could see it sometimes on the rim of someone's coffee cup or even a piece of paper. Global warming was blamed, some complicated process that only vaguely made sense. But no one really knew why it grew indoors and outdoors, regardless of temperature or humidity or cleanliness or the type of surface. It was studied enthusiastically by botanists. The substance was found in three more cities in the region. It took on a name: Sporangela. When the phenomenon really got out of hand, people got a little worried, but about what they didn't know. There was a picture in the Boise paper that August of the substance making a pretty pattern on the side of the convention center in the middle of the city, starting eight feet off the sidewalk and spreading around the corner, a patch ten feet wide and five feet long that had grown over the course of a weekend. It got so that if you lived in my region of Idaho, you couldn't go a whole day without seeing it growing somewhere. It could be in the building where you worked or on the back of a stop sign or inside the bus, on your seat. Once you chipped it away, it was gone. But it just grew somewhere else. It had spread artificially somehow to places other than Blue Terrace, skipping geographic areas miles wide, in direct defiance of natural logic.

The phenomenon went on for about three months. It more or less disappeared with the onset of colder weather. One serious cold snap in Blue Terrace seemed to wipe it out. It just didn't appear anymore after being removed by human hands from every reachable place it had claimed. On the night of October 19, 2004, it fell to thirty degrees in the suburbs. That was the night I saw the thing that scared me so badly, which I never told anyone about. The Sporangela was gone very quickly after that except for little aging patches of it no one ever bothered to remove.

I was camping. There's a place near Crown Creek, a little campground that no one much pays attention to, and I went there that weekend before the place shut down for the season. There wasn't much to do except kayak in the creek and do some mild hiking through the thin woods,

and on Saturday night I was in my tent reading by penlight when I thought I'd go for a long walk in the moonlight. I got out of the tent and walked through the campground, which was mostly empty, and I started to hike along the southernmost stretch of Crown Creek. It led through the woods for a half-mile or so, and then the land opened up. I looked up at the stars as I walked. The land was owned by the state and became nothing but rolling hills that went on for miles. It was very peaceful. I was completely alone.

After twenty minutes of walking in the cold, I came upon a vague hump in the darkness, just a few feet away from the bank of the creek. As I got closer I saw it was an electrical transformer, positioned out there in the middle of nowhere. I stopped to rest when I saw it, and turned and took in a view of the creek and the land beyond it, and I sat where I was and looked at the stars. I stayed like that for about ten minutes when I heard something off to my right, near the transformer. I looked over there but couldn't see much. It sounded like something was moving through the grass, an animal I thought, but moving very low and smoothly.

I stood up and squinted into the dark. Then I saw it. There was something in the grass, it was true, something moving. It was big. It clung to the ground. It was snakelike, wormlike, but gigantic, as big as a person. The thing was brightly colored. Maybe it was totally white. It was moving past the transformer. As I watched, the thing slithered through the grass, having come from the creek, I think. All I can say is that for about five seconds I got an excellent view of it. My night vision had adjusted well. I would say the creature was six feet long, thick as a slightly built man. When the moonlight fell on it just so, I could see that its flesh was slick, and that as it moved, it was turning, twisting like a screw. My eyes went to where I figured its head would be. I had stopped breathing, I think. I saw that the creature had a neck, a humanlike neck, and then I saw a face. I don't know how many eyes there were, maybe none at all. I saw some marks, but all I could see for certain was that there was a long dark mouth, like a thick slash. The only other detail I could see of the thing was that it was half-covered in what looked like *Sporangela*.

The creature moved on, twisting through the grass, and it was gone fast. I was in shock, but I followed it. I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't hear it anymore. I jogged a few steps and then the sound came again, the sound of it moving. I saw another shape in the dark. Near the transformer was a golf cart. Maybe it belonged to someone working for the electric company, or maybe to someone working for the campground. It was sitting alone near the creek, in the short grass. I stopped and watched the creature snake its way toward the cart.

Only then did I remember the penlight in my pocket. I dug for it and came out with it, and turned it on. I pointed it at where the sound was coming from and saw a little segment of the creature. Instantly I could see the brownish green of *Sporangela* clinging to its side, and then the pattern of it disappeared as the thing twisted. I shifted the tiny ray of the penlight, which was just a dim, unfocused yellow circle. The creature moved right through it. I saw its head better. Its neck stretched a little. I saw a patch of *Sporangela* growing on the side of the golf cart. The creature slid up the wheel well, its body clinging somehow to the cart, and moved over the patch of *Sporangela*, and when the full length of the thing moved past it, the patch had been scraped away in one fluid motion, and there was a clean path of white paint exposed. As the thing twisted I saw that the substance had attached itself to it, especially near that mouth. It slithered back into the grass.

I shut off the penlight. I stood where I was. In seconds the slithering sound moved away. This time I didn't follow. I waited till I thought the thing was entirely gone, and then I crept up to the golf cart. I turned the light on again and touched the patch of *Sporangela*. The creature had left some of the substance behind but had taken most of it. It would have taken a person five or ten minutes to chip that amount away, and it would have come off little by little, leaving specks

behind unless you were very thorough, but the creature had made it vanish in seconds. I touched the paint. There was no moisture there, no sense of anything having moved over it. I walked back to the campground. I remember at one point I felt so alone and exposed there by the creek that I wanted to shout for help, or break into a run. I didn't let myself do it, though. Finally I reached my tent and got inside. I lay awake for three hours, shivering and trying to figure out what I'd just seen. I couldn't make any sense of it.

In the days that came after, I became more and more convinced that what I had seen was some kind of harvesting. But the creature had not been like anything I could even find in books when I tried to research it. That size and manner of movement made it an impossibility. I didn't tell anyone what I had seen. I was going to try to wait until one of the creatures had been spotted by other people. But it never happened. In winter, when the Sporangela phenomenon was getting to be old news, I finally told my roommate one night what I had seen. He listened attentively, but I could tell he thought I must have been drunk. He mentioned that nothing I said surprised him, given the high amounts of UFO activity in the state around that time. I asked him if he was joking, and he said yes, he was, but I could look it up and I would find that what he said was at least partially true.

I've never been someone who believed in UFOs, but I did look it up. I searched online and found a newspaper story written about the area of Idaho I lived in, published in August. It was about the unusually high number of reports to Fredericks Air Force Base about strange craft in the area. The military had to deal with these reports all the time, but they seemed more than willing to discuss the strange nature of many of the recent reports, because they weren't taking them very seriously. Along with the usual once-monthly accounts of cigar-shaped crafts and bright lights in the sky were three or four more unusual ones. The Pocatello newspaper had talked to the people who'd called in the claims to get more details.

There was a unique pattern to their sightings of strange things. None of the people said anything about lights or crafts in the clouds. Instead the common thread seemed to be large objects, the size of small cars maybe, flitting quickly from one building to another in short, completely silent jumps, always before dawn when the world was at its darkest. The objects would make their way from one place to another, attaching themselves to large surfaces, remaining utterly still for a minute or so, and then moving on. The objects did not bend or wobble or change shape in any way. Their coloring was impossible to make out. One person on a blog I found described one of the objects lifting off from the top of a grocery store very suddenly and disappearing upwards into the sky at such a speed that it was gone in less than two seconds, again with no sound.

Then there was a video that someone had taken. I found it buried in some public video sharing site. The footage was grainy and shaky, and to a disinterested eye it could almost have been anything, or more likely faked. It lasted for just fifteen seconds. It showed a large vague hump against a dark sky. The person who held the video camera kept changing settings to try to allow more light into the lens, but it didn't do much. All that you could really see was that the hump was attached somehow to the side of what looked like a school building. There was playground equipment far in the background.

The camera was a hundred yards away or so and moving closer to the hump when the thing shot out of frame to the right. Nothing seemed to push it. It merely leapt away. The camera panned wildly to the right to try to follow it, but there was nothing there. There was confusion for a few seconds, and then the person holding the camera tried to zoom in as best he could to something much farther off in the distance, a light tower off in an empty field. For a split second you could see a dark hump clinging to it near the very top, a hundred feet off the ground or so,

but then, after a little more shakiness, the thing was simply gone for good. The video was titled 'UFO Getaway.'

I told one more person about what I had seen. It was my father. He'd always had an open mind. But even he didn't fully understand what I had experienced. I did more research into the UFO trend around the state but found that it ended right around the time Sporangela disappeared. For two years I was occasionally haunted at night by the memory of what I had seen, and unnaturally disturbed by the image of dark humps on buildings leaping across the sky with no sound. But as these things do, they began to fade from my consciousness slowly but surely. I began to be able to convince myself that what I had seen on my hike could be explained by fatigue, a prank, anything.

Three months ago, in August of 2006, people began to again see odd mold-like formations growing on the sides of buildings, on walls where they worked, on highway signs and trees and sidewalks. This time the substance was of a slightly different color, darker, more black than brown or green. And this time the stuff was almost everywhere, in dozens of cities across this country and others. News of it popped up quickly. At first, of course, it was tied directly to Sporangela, and when the world learned of its first harmless manifestation in Idaho two years previous, no one was too upset. Again, it was just a strange eyesore. There didn't seem to be any health risks.

But when Sporangela returned, I was immediately terrified. I told no one how I felt. My terror grew when people realized that the substance was spreading rapidly and growing everywhere. It caked on plants and cars and dog collars and dollar bills, and some said it could even form on human skin. A photo in *Newsweek* showed it covering the wings of a small airplane. People chipped it away as best they could, but it just grew somewhere else. Now the stuff was studied much more closely, by many more scientists, but of course some had never stopped their studies of it the first time.

It couldn't have been more than a week after the second wave began when a researcher in France released a report that was at first discredited, then accepted piecemeal, and then recognized as the total truth. Back in 2004 this researcher had been contacted by two botanists who noted how strangely Sporangela behaved, and who thought there was something else to be found in it other than the mossy vegetable material they had discovered. They wanted to look at it with more powerful equipment than anyone had thought was necessary. So they contacted a nano-technologist in Arizona who in turn referred them to the French researcher. He had processed Sporangela samples through a nanometric device and was baffled to find that in addition to displaying the stuff's organic components, his computer wanted to show him bewildering electronic data streams it had uncovered in the samples.

It seemed impossible, but when the researcher kept breaking the data down over the course of several months, his findings were consistent. He came to believe that there was computer-generated data in the Sporangela. He was able to prove it by feeding the data into a supercomputer. Hiding within the cells of the Sporangela were infinitely tiny streams of video information that no human computer could properly understand. The computers did their best to try to simulate what the video consisted of. After another year of study, crude images were simulated. They suggested that Sporangela samples taken from the side of any given building were filled with millions of images of the area surrounding that building. Samples from a

sidewalk contained crude 'snapshots' of people walking by, images stolen by the cells at a rate of twenty per second. There was a mind-boggling amount of video data in each handful of Sporangela.

The researcher's results were argued about, retested, debated, dismissed, and embraced. The limitations of our computer technology cost us valuable time. It was too late to save us by the time there was agreement that the Sporangela had been observing us somehow, collecting images of the human race and its behavior and environs. The second wave of the new, different substance had already come.

People started getting sick. Small specks of this new Sporangela were loosed easily by the slightest breeze. People said it was like swallowing an occasional bit of sand, nothing to worry about. But the illness that struck the human race was so ghastly that panic took hold quickly, and the Sporangela was the source of all our fears. Within a day or so of inhaling the slightest bit of the stuff, a person's blood vessels became gravely irritated. Their eyes became hideously reddened. Another day might pass before the fatal attack came. A person could be in an ambulance on their way to one of thousands of overfilled hospitals when they went into cardiac arrest and their vessels began to burst. Their pores opened and blood flowed through. Blood came out of their eyes, their nose, their ears. Their skin went a dark purplish color, and wounds actually formed from within, releasing blood from the body through the flesh. People bled out within minutes, even seconds. Their bodies became a soaked mass, dead weight. It could happen on the street. There was almost no warning. Once your eyes went red, it was too late. You were death. It was only a question of how many days you had to live.

It took all of two weeks to create a state of emergency all over America and the world. The new strain of Sporangela was burned everywhere it could be burned or covered with foam and a sticky substance called Exoclast that sprayed from firemen's hoses, millions of gallons layered on surfaces everywhere you went. It was much too late. Particles of this Sporangela were everywhere in the air. People shut themselves in their homes only to inhale the stuff through the vents, completely unaware of it.

The newspapers have shut down everywhere, but you can still get the Emergency Broadcast System in several places, and sometimes real live people come on, and sometimes they'll talk about the first wave of Sporangela and how maybe, just maybe, some race of beings from a place in the solar system we'll never know about brought it to a cluster of small Midwestern cities no one fussed much over in order to document our species and detect our biological weaknesses. After that, it was only a matter of harvesting the data somehow, returning it to space, and creating a viral disease, borne within a different sort of Sporangela, which would destroy us all in a matter of months. And then it would be time for the creators of the genocide to arrive on earth en masse.

I wonder why I'm not dead yet. I suppose I have only my own terror to thank. I was one of the first to barricade himself indoors with bottled water and canned food, and here I sit. It's 1 a.m., November 9, 2006. I know I can't survive. My time will be over soon. So tomorrow I'm going to set out walking, not in the hopes of being saved, but because I'd rather die out there in the sunlight than in this cramped, forgotten apartment. I bought a gun ten days ago. If my eyes become red with sickness, I'll take myself out by Crown Creek.

I hope the end comes before I might possibly see another one of the worms, those worms that I've never seen mention of in any newspaper, on any website. The harvester worms that took their samples away in flitting, silent crafts. I know what I saw. The blackish Sporangela is visible growing on the side of the building across from mine, and it fills me with dread, but to see the

living things that will someday come to collect or dispose of its remnants would drive me insane. That motion, that twisting, snakelike motion, and the sound the grass made being smoothed beneath it, would snap my mind. The sight of an old woman bleeding out and dying within sixty seconds as she emerged from a light-rail station two days ago didn't do it. The image of a collector worm's mouth would. Its awful mouth working furiously to gather, and retain. Goodbye.

presence

My name is Koren Gill. It was on a cold October day that I received a letter from Gorham Lennarde inviting me to speak to him about my request to spend the night in one of the more obscure haunted houses in the world. Lennarde had purchased the Poldrict house eighteen years before, and it had sat, mostly ignored and in disrepair, in Albany, New York, ever since. In November I flew to Sarasota to see him. I had heard plenty of stories about Lennarde, stories of how the seven years he'd spent attempting to exorcise a dockworker in Algiers had ruined him and turned him into a physical shell of what he had once been.

Thirty seconds after he opened the door to his little house to let me in, it was obvious that most of the stories were true. A wave of heat, not air conditioning, flowed over me, and he immediately apologized for it. He had been suffering the sensation of always being very cold since about 2008. On this eighty-degree day he was wearing a heavy sweater, a scarf, and thin gloves over his hands. He moved very slowly, a fifty-year-old man who looked seventy. He wasn't shy about describing his physical ailments to me: occasional blindness in one eye, an inability to eat for days at a time, insomnia, constant bronchial infections, arthritis, numbness in his feet that sometimes rendered him unable to walk. He had not left his home in four years. They said it was all because of the toll the exorcism had taken. That dockworker, a man of sixty-seven when Lennarde had met him, had become inexplicably possessed by the spirit of his dead twin, who had died at the age of nine.

But that day we only talked about the Poldrict house. What I would find there, he said, would not be much, and I would probably leave very disappointed. There was a slight chance, however, that the trip would be a dangerous one. You see, there are two ways to bring out the possible malevolence of a ghost. The first of course is to attempt to touch it or act upon it in a belligerent way. The second was discovered much, much later in the timeline of the history of paranormal research, and it was discovered by accident by Gorham Lennarde himself in 1987 during his explorations of the tombs of ancient soldiers in Heraclea.

It was this second trigger that Lennarde was worried about in the case of the Poldrict house, and the reason he had been so careful over the years in allowing access to it. I would be only the fourth person to enter the place in the last two decades. To ensure my safety, Lennarde had

spent the months after first receiving my query letter doing some due diligence in libraries and online, checking and double-checking the available literature about the house, which was virtually nonexistent. He gave me the keys, wished me good luck, and sent me on my way only after making sure he had a cellphone number should he need to contact me. I drove to the airport at once. From LaGuardia on the other end, it was a three-hour trip to the Poldrict house.

It wasn't difficult to find. It sat on a long downslope in the corner of a small wooded lot at the edge of a lower middle class neighborhood, a mile down the road from a junkyard, and about a quarter-mile away from the nearest inhabited house. Lennarde spent just enough money on upkeep to make sure it had very stout locks all over and appeared vaguely inhabited so no one would break in, going so far as to pay to have a couple of cars parked there all the time, cars that were occasionally switched out for one another by a hired hand who was forbidden to enter the house. There wasn't much that could be done about the lights inside; when a bulb burned out, it stayed out, and Lennarde told me quite frankly that if so many of the lamps hadn't fizzled out over the past year, he might have refused my request for entry. I arrived there with nothing more than a hiker's pack containing a bedroll and some basic supplies, including new light bulbs. I entered the house at 2 p.m. on November 12.

What was left of the décor was forgettably early American, covered in dust, just enough of it remaining to offer an uncomfortable one-night stay. There were no linens, no dishes, nothing in the cabinets, no real possessions. What remained were the things the last owners had never taken with them when they'd left in 1979. Lennarde had told me that like the owners previous to them, they had been petrified the first night but never again saw the ghost that had visited them.

It is very rare that the cause of an authentic haunting is simply never discovered, but that was exactly the case with the Poldrict house, named after the original owners, about whom no one knew anything but a last name from a 19th-century lease with an incorrect address, and some dusty documents that hinted the purchaser was more than likely an accountant. For more than 150 years, no one had been able to unearth anything that explained the presence of the ghost. I and Lennarde himself had exhausted the usual channels of information only to find nothing about the Poldrict family or those who had come after them that was very useful. The closest I'd come to a breakthrough was when I'd fallen down a rabbit hole for a month pursuing the traces of a single comment from a colleague of mine, who swore that an old professor of his had read that the case had something to do with a wedding ring. Where this was read, or when, I hadn't been able to uncover.

I walked through the house changing fuses and bulbs, looking briefly into all the barren rooms—including the squalid, spider-infested cellar—and then I sat with a notebook and pen beside the front window to watch the daylight fade. I had been working for weeks on a poem that wouldn't resolve itself. At a little past six I ate a couple of protein bars and drank a bottle of water, and I sat and waited. I could just barely see the road beyond the upslope. No cars drove down it for as long as I watched. At one point I did see a boy, perhaps a teenager, riding quickly along on a racing bike, not much more than a dot in the distance. I texted Lennarde that I was inside the house and safe. I got no response.

The first clue that something was going to happen was a sudden rush of almost overwhelming fatigue, so bad my eyes closed involuntarily and my chin dropped to my chest before I roused myself. I would describe it as an attack. I tensed up. This had happened to me twice before, and both instances were prologue to an occurrence just an hour or so afterward. I took two caffeine pills, though they were most likely irrelevant. I fought through the fatigue minute by minute, pacing the room. At 7:15, I heard the footsteps. They were coming from beyond the living room,

out in the tiny foyer and beyond that. Taking a few steps in the direction of the cellar, I could determine they originated behind the door that closed it off. Light footsteps on the slowly rotting wooden staircase that sat in the dark, decades in and decades out. Coming up, coming up toward the door.

I stood in the center of the living room and waited. I wished I had more light, but I had neglected to turn on more than a single lamp in the corner. Through the entrance to the room, I could see beyond to where the cellar door now pushed outward. I was sweating, shaking just a little. A woman appeared there, a very thin woman of average height. She left the door ajar and moved toward the living room to meet me. More light fell on her as she entered. She was wearing the dark, featureless clothing of a 19th-century housewife. Her hair was pulled back tight. She appeared to be about forty years old. She looked at me half quizzically, half with familiarity. She stopped about ten feet away from me and spoke the same single sentence she had uttered to the two families who had lived here uneventfully after her first reported appearance, and to those who had come afterward. Addressing me as someone named Herman, she asked if I would like something to eat or drink while I did my work. I didn't answer. Her stare was fixed, and she moved not at all.

Thirty full seconds passed and she turned away from me, seeming neither vexed nor disappointed. It was as if the ghost were simply following a script to its resolution. She moved out of the living room. The only further detail I noted as she walked away was a large dust print on her right shoulder. She went past the cellar door and began to ascend the staircase that led upstairs to a pair of bedrooms. I allowed her to get halfway up and then I followed. When I got to the bottom of the staircase, treading very lightly, she was already at the top, back in darkness. I saw her turn to the right, and that was the last I saw of her. The upstairs hallway was deserted when I reached the top, and so were the bedrooms and the single bath. In that cold bathroom I peered down through a filthy window toward the woods to the southeast. I thought I saw something moving within them just beyond the edge of the back lawn, some unexplained shadow, but I couldn't be sure. Eventually I turned away.

And so my encounter with the ghost was in every respect identical to those of the others who had seen her, no different at all. None of us had had to wait more than several hours to meet her. I knew there would be little point in me staying inside the house, but I stayed anyway, writing and pacing, drinking bottled water, and texting Lennarde, who answered only once with the letters 'OK,' until I absolutely had to lay down on the couch nearby. I kept the lights on, and sleep came quickly. When I awoke, I was alone and rain was falling outside. It was 8 a.m., daylight covering me where I lay, and time to return to my own home.

It all felt like an anticlimax for months as I went about my other work, but I never fully left the case of the Poldrict house behind. I found it more mysterious than my colleagues did. I had underlined the words 'wedding ring' inside the notebook I kept about the house. The ghost had been wearing one, I had noticed, but further research came to the usual dead end. I exchanged two more letters with Lennarde. In the last one he wrote to me, he mentioned I should consider myself somewhat lucky. What he was referring to was the second way to very suddenly bring out the malevolence inside a ghost, if it indeed held any within it. This was to stumble upon the secret as to why the ghost remained so tortured. They all carried either an immense amount of guilt or a torturous yearning to fulfill a destiny that had been thwarted, and in some cases there was something deeply sinister about what they knew and which had never been found out.

The most important advance in the field of paranormal research over the past thirty years had been Gorham Lennarde's discovery that the moment a spirit's secret was discovered or rediscovered—by anyone at all—the anger, the rage, and the agony were unleashed, posing

great danger to the spirit's next visitor. In the case of the Poldrict house, it seemed more and more likely that if the strange woman who offered something to eat or drink while 'Herman' went about his work *did* possess the capacity to become dangerous, her trigger would never be found. Perhaps there was simply none at all, and she was just a mournful, lost soul unable to rest because of the regular human sorrows that engulf so many of us.

The course of my work took me far away from Albany over the next two years, and there was simply no more time to investigate the case between teaching assignments and archaeological digs throughout Eastern Europe. One evening I attended a lecture at the University of Warsaw, the topic being the physical toll paranormal research like mine could take, and a slide came up showing an old man hunched over in a wheelchair, looking at the camera blankly, unsmiling. It took me more than a minute to realize that it was Gorham Lennarde I was looking at. The photo had been taken a few months prior to the lecture. Since I had seen him, he had gone into steeper decline.

About ten months after that lecture, I received news that Gorham Lennarde had died. He had gone in a most unusual, cryptic way. After years of literally not leaving his house, he had one day limped into town, wearing his usual cold weather apparel, and found his way to a cheap chain restaurant, where he had sat down and ordered a pot of coffee. At some point he had gone into the men's room. A manager was alerted a half hour later that someone was in there with the door locked and was not responding. Finally the manager broke in. He found Lennarde on his knees in front of the sink, his head immersed in six inches of water, having somehow drowned in it. On the very same day, and in the very same hour, an old man named Rauf Dufranc living across the Atlantic in Algiers had tied a large rock to his leg and pushed it off a pier. This was the man Lennarde had helped to successfully exorcise. Or maybe it hadn't been such a success after all.

In June, I was in Manhattan following up on rumors that two divers working at the bottom of the Hudson River, having descended there as part of a salvage mission after a small jet crashed into the water, killing twelve, had reported seeing something truly bizarre in those black, icy depths. They swore that by the lights dropped down to two hundred feet, they had seen a pair of hunched, humanlike figures carrying two of the victims' bodies into the darkness, walking on the muddy river floor and somehow disappearing when pursued. But I was called away from that by an email from an attorney telling me that I had inherited something from Gorham Lennarde.

A phone call revealed that he had actually willed the Poldrict house to me. There was no formal explanation aside from a note that the attorney read to me. In it, Lennarde wished me well with the house and hoped that I would either use it in my research or sell it to fund other projects. It was that simple. The attorney offered to overnight the necessary papers for me to sign, and I gave him the address of my hotel. Because I was only a few hours away from the house, I drove out there the very next night, June 15, to take a look at what was now the grandest possession I'd ever owned. I was still intrigued by it, but more so perhaps by the thought of what field work its sale might finance than the presence that dwelt within.

Though it was past sunset when I got to the house, I could see it was much like I'd left it. Two lamps were still lit in the windows, perhaps from my first visit, as I had no idea if anyone else had come here in the interim. One compact car was parked in the drive, and I recognized it as one of the dummy cars Lennarde had arranged for. The area around the house was unchanged, still struggling. In the package the attorney had sent me were the carefully wrapped keys to the house, five of them in all. It took me several minutes of standing in the dark to figure out, by

trial and error, which ones opened the front door. I had nearly given up, figuring Lennarde may have had the locks changed, when the deadbolt turned over. And then I was back in the Poldrict house.

Once inside, I did not feel the desire to explore. I had seen everything there was to see. I suppose I did want to encounter the ghost again, but since I had seen her once, the chances of that recurring were essentially nil. I would not wait all night or longer for her to come up the cellar stairs to ask me if I, a stand-in for someone named Herman, who seemed to have been her accountant husband in the late part of the 19th century, wanted something to eat or drink while I did my work. I didn't feel I'd learn much from the experience. Looking briefly into the living room, I saw that the small writing table where I had some time ago worked on a poem was still set up beside the window. I set the package from Lennarde's attorney on it and sat down to go through it, signing whatever needed to be signed.

Even now, a year after that night, sitting here in my house in Atlanta, my hands shaking a little as I write and my skin now so sensitive I sometimes can't go out on windy days, I am astounded by the awfulness of my timing in visiting the house. Had I only gone through those papers back at my hotel, I would have discovered how the diligence, access to obscure legal documents, and blind luck that Lennarde's attorney possessed had uncovered something terrible, something that suddenly made me terribly vulnerable. You see, in trying to appraise the house's value, he'd located the original lease—not a scan of it—and having no preconceptions of the handwritten name shown on it, had typed the name he saw there into a genealogical database as *Poldrice*, not Poldrict, perceiving the last letter differently than anyone had before. This had led him to uncover the fact that the only Albany family named Poldrict actually had no relation to the house, and every dead end became suddenly clear. It had been briefly foreclosed upon after the sudden death of Herman Poldrice, a death long since forgotten, but which had shocked the police when they came upon the scene on June 2, 1887. Gorham Lennarde's attorney now knew something no one else living did.

At exactly 8 p.m., as I finished reading a photocopy of a one hundred twenty-five-year-old county court document that sent shivers down my spine, and had my first thoughts of leaving the house now, right *now*, I heard a noise from the cellar. It was a sharp thump, as if something blunt had struck a block of wood. That was followed by a piercing shriek of pain, coming from a woman's throat. As I began to rise from my chair, knocking the papers onto the floor, the shriek was repeated again and again at quick intervals, and each time it became less a howl of physical agony than of rage. And then came the sound of heavy footsteps on the cellar stairs—not slow this time, but running, running fast. I was too frightened to move even an inch further. I would not be able to get out of the living room and into the foyer in time to avoid what was coming for me.

The door to the cellar flew open and the ghost appeared. She strode into the room where I stood overcome with terror. In her right hand, Emily Poldrice held her left one, which she had chopped off with a butcher knife. Blood poured from the unwrapped stump. She thrust the hand toward me, her face covered in sweat, her eyes wild.

'Here!' she screamed. 'If your whore in Boston wants jewelry, give her this too!'

And the last thing I remember before waking up two days later on the back lawn, hungry and dazed, was the way she shook her gray, bloody, dismembered hand so as to make me see the wedding ring on it, now wrapped around a lifeless finger.

The madness of the mentally ill Emily Poldrice, the fury that had been building for years and boiled forth one night in 1887, resulted in her own death by blood loss, but not before she had savagely bludgeoned her unfaithful husband with the poker kept beside the living room fireplace. I did not suffer her physical wrath; no, that would have been impossible, but I have suffered nonetheless, overpowered and infected by that unleashed malevolence. Colleagues tell me I will get better, that the nightmares will stop, my heart will strengthen, the hemophilia will be cured, and I'll stop shaking and feeling such pain. I must be patient, they say, and wait, and stay busy. Until that unlikely time I spend my days reading, trying to stay warm, and living off the money from the insurance payment that came after I arranged for the Poldrice house to be burned to the ground. Whether Emily Poldrice will now rest in peace or roam the lonely woods to the east of the property forever, appearing to unlucky wanderers in the dead of night, remains to be seen—but I vow to you, not by me.

proof

My name is Rodric Bolling. In June of last year, after more than eighteen years of frustration and disappointment in the field of paranormal investigation, I released word through this niche research community that I was making an offer of \$100,000, which was all the money I could possibly ever raise, for documented proof of the supernatural. Such offers have been made by others before, of course, and mine was no different, and I expected it to raise no eyebrows and never be seriously considered. But on December 6, 2013, I received a staticky pay phone call at a little past 11 p.m. from a man who announced his name several times as Raymond Reynitz. He was responding to my offer as he understood it from one of his business associates.

What was amazing about our conversation is that he had no interest in taking my money; instead, he essentially wanted to pay *me* very handsomely to travel to him and observe a phenomenon that he believed would satisfy my yearning for an authentic paranormal experience. He urged me to research him on the Web to establish his identity and the validity of his offer, and told me he would call me back in twenty-four hours. Before he hung up, I asked him where he was currently located, and the one word he spoke caught my attention as no other did: Cabell.

Cabell had just in the past two weeks become something of a household word. It was an insignificant town in western Michigan with a population of perhaps five thousand. Since September, though, it had become the hunting ground of a prolific serial killer believed to be responsible for as many as sixteen murders. The victims had spanned all age groups and genders. The rate of the killings had so terrified the people of Cabell that it had installed a curfew and made an attempt to forbid any child from walking anywhere unattended by an adult. The FBI had descended upon the town and was a daily presence. But nothing could be

done; a new body was found every three or four days, always in the town limits or within five miles of them. And now here was a man calling me from that place, urging me to come to him.

I did in fact research Raymond Reynitz; it wasn't difficult at all. He was a very well-known industrialist who had moved from Seattle into the one true mansion in Cabell to be closer to the daily operations of his winter clothing company in Grand Rapids. Articles about him had appeared in everything from *The Wall Street Journal* to *Outside* magazine. He was certainly not some crackpot.

When he called me again, again from a pay phone, he was again vague about what his supernatural proof was; in fact, he told me there was no way he could possibly describe it, save for telling me it was a simple collection of objects whose meaning would be completely clear if only I examined them. His offer of a free plane ticket, hotel accommodations, and whatever other expenses I might incur still stood, but he informed me I would have to act quickly. I asked Reynitz how he had come across the objects in question, but it was just another thing he couldn't and wouldn't reveal to me. The mention of the murders that were taking place got no reaction from him, only a long silence at the end of the line followed by another urging that I come quickly from Boston before the proof I sought was lost forever.

I remember the most shocking thing I had seen on TV during that time having to do with the killings was an intentionally blurred photo they showed again and again, in black and white to spare the viewer too much detail. You were looking at the dead body of a victim; it was neatly folded over the tall tombstone of a soldier who'd died in the Civil War, in a cemetery in Cabell, folded at the waist, legs on one side, torso on the other, arms outstretched and touching the ground, head hanging down. Arranged like that, like a piece of paper folded over that stone. So very strange.

I landed in Detroit on December 9. On my way to securing my rental car, I got a text message from the chairman of the psychology department at the university where I taught. He told me to turn on the news, that the governor of Michigan was trying something crazy in Cabell. He had just in the last twelve hours declared a state of emergency there, and the town was essentially being evacuated. The hope was that this sudden upheaval would cordon off the town and give the authorities the ability to do a massive sweep for clues, and maybe even look face to face at the killer as he tried to leave the area; every car was stopped on the way out. Questions about the legality of this act erupted immediately of course, but by the time I had landed, 150 miles away, everyone in the town had long since been given the command to leave for a duration of not less than two days. Nothing like this had ever been tried. It left a major problem though, which was that I had to wait for Raymond Reynitz to call me so we could figure out another plan.

The call came as I was driving toward Cabell, which I wouldn't be allowed to enter. Reynitz was still there, still in town, holed up in his mansion. There were apparently no exceptions to the state of emergency; everyone had to leave, but he told me he had enough influence to be allowed to stay, which seemed suspicious to me. He wouldn't possibly be able to get me through the police cordons though, so he told me I would have to find my own way in. He couldn't elaborate, but he told me that the state of emergency had jeopardized the items he needed to show me, and if I didn't get to him tonight, there would most likely be no second chance. When he hung up, we were at an impasse.

I got to Ionia, the town adjacent to Cabell, at about eight o'clock that night. I could sense just driving through it that the diners and restaurants and hotels were full of people who had been forced to evacuate Cabell. And I had to get in there somehow; by that time I was fixated on what Reynitz had promised me. I had to know what his items were. The mystery had gotten to me entirely.

I sat in the car with my cellphone for about an hour, just poring over maps of the area as shown on that tiny screen. I knew it was only the roads that had been closed; that was all the authorities could possibly do, and that left a lot of woodland open to anyone on foot if they really wanted to get into town. I called Reynitz and told him my travel plan. I began to see that if I just left the car where it was, I could walk about two miles through the woods before coming up on a small residential community within the Cabell town limits, and the roads there would curve out to the street where Reynitz's mansion was located. Two miles in the dark and the cold, all alone, but that was the way it would have to be.

I wasn't afraid of getting caught by the police, since I could probably talk my way out of that easily enough. What I was really afraid of was being by myself and exposed in Cabell for a good hour when there was a killer maybe still roaming it. I told Reynitz that I would wait until about ten o'clock, and then I would start moving. I was in a small shopping center, and decided to park around back and out of sight. From the trunk of my car I took the cross wrench I used to tighten the bolts when I had to change a tire, just to have something heavy with me. It was a quick upslope into the woods. Just seeing the way the lights of the shopping center illuminated only the first ten yards or so of the woods gave me pause. No one saw me head in.

It was agonizing how, being in the middle of winter, every step I took cracked dead leaves and twigs and seemed so loud. I had no flashlight because I was afraid a beam that bright would give away my location. I looked from the few steps ahead of me back to the phone constantly, tracking myself with the GPS and just hoping my signal would stay strong all the way. I might have made it to where I was going without becoming almost sick from tension had it not been for the movements of the deer. Every time one of them moved nearby, it sounded like footsteps, and at one point I stopped dead in my tracks when one bolted in front of me, less than ten feet away. My heart wouldn't stop pounding. There was nothing I could do to distinguish the sound of deer from the sound of someone following me. So I told myself to be pragmatic and not divert my gaze from the direct line ahead, no matter what. I would reach my destination in fifty minutes or so if I just kept focused. But every three or four minutes there was another shifting sound or crack or vague shape far away, and every time it happened I gripped the wrench harder.

Halfway to Cabell, I saw a glow way off toward the east, a very white, almost ethereal glow. I thought I heard voices. I crept forward, keeping low, until I saw that the white glow was created by a circle of artificial lights, deep here in the woods. There were fifteen or twenty people standing in one spot among the trees. Three big arc lights had been set up. From where I was, standing behind a tree and peering around it very carefully, I could see that police were mixed among the people. There were no vehicles because none could penetrate the woods, as thick as they were. Right away I knew what I was looking at. Obviously, another body had just been found. Men came and went from the scene along a single improvised route, to the east. Some people just stood, observing, talking amongst each other or into radios, and at least two seemed to be hunkered down in a certain spot nearby. The trees blocked too much to see details.

I moved slower now, fearing I'd be spotted and that I was getting really off course, and sometimes I just stood against a tree and listened for voices. None came. When I first saw a scattering of distant lights that meant the edge of the town of Cabell, I moved much faster. Emerging from the woods, I got a bird's eye view of the town, and was stunned. The only lights were streetlights. Virtually every house I could see was dark. Maybe a forgotten lamp left on in an upstairs room here and there, or the safety lights inside a storefront, but other than that, nothing. This place really had been abandoned. What was directly ahead of me now was something that was depicted on my digital map as a featureless gray mass that had to be crossed to reach the far end of High Street. In real life it was an unfenced industrial property, maybe a quarry of some kind. There were a few shadowy buildings and piles and piles of rocks and sand, a line of trucks, a couple of warehouses.

Reynitz had told me to keep off the streets at all costs, since police would almost inevitably intercept me, so crossing the property was a must. When the place had been left behind after the evacuation order, it had been truly abandoned, all the lights snuffed out. I walked between two low buildings and across a muddy and icy open stretch. To my left, there were woodpiles and huge stacks of something in giant bags, and to my right there were what looked like garage bays, completely dark. Past the open stretch, the property became something of a maze. The buildings here were just for storage, and they were taller and packed together. Spread out among them were giant industrial slides and thin towers accessed by curving ladders. I had to maneuver around everything now, and actually check the GPS to make sure I wasn't wandering hopelessly off course.

Then what I feared would happen did, as I came to a vast pit, maybe a quarter-mile across, that cut me off from a line of trees beyond which I could see High Street. I didn't see how I could get around it, because now there was safety fencing cutting me off to the left and right. I turned around, checking the time. It was 11:30. I had no choice but to call Reynitz and tell him I would be much later than I thought. Feeling exposed, I retreated back into the snarl of shadowy buildings and structures. My hands and my ears and my toes were stinging from the cold. And I was scared to be where I was. I wondered if the victim who had been found tonight had just been killed within the past few hours, and if so, where the killer would have been hiding. My fingers were unsteady as I tried to punch the numbers into the phone, only partially from the cold. I put it up to my ear and listened for the rings. Three, then six, then ten. No one was answering.

It was at that moment that I heard a voice right in front of me. A man said, 'You don't have to call.' Someone stepped out of the dark, a silhouette standing near the doorway of one of the decrepit storage buildings. It was a man. Immediately he spoke my name and told me he was Raymond Reynitz. He told me that the police presence nearby was very heavy and that he'd come out in the hopes of intercepting me so he could guide me to the mansion. A lot ran through my mind then, but I couldn't figure out how this man would know what was happening unless this indeed was Reynitz. I had to trust him, though not for a second did I loosen my grip on the cross wrench.

He began to walk and I followed him, keeping just a few feet behind. He made his way very swiftly across the property, in a direction I hadn't gone in. He knew exactly where the safety fencing ended and where there was a break that led into the trees. There was a wide footpath there, an exit for vehicles onto High Street. Instead of crossing High Street, we continued to curve around it, sticking very close to the woods, not moving directly toward the mansion. High Street was a twisting row of residential homes, all dark. Very suddenly Reynitz cut to his left,

looking in both directions, and he waved back at me to move more swiftly. We cut across a front lawn and through a pair of back yards, sticking close to the sides of the houses. Before moving out into the open again, Reynitz stuck his head around the second house and looked up the street, holding a hand out to suggest I shouldn't move until he did. We finally went, and I could see why he had hesitated. There was a police car parked down this new street. It was dark, though, an empty sentry perhaps.

We went through two more back yards, and then the mansion was in view. We were right in front of it, and instead of sneaking around the back, as I thought we might, we walked directly up the driveway, which was bordered thickly on both sides by trees that blocked the view in three directions. The house was the biggest one in town, old, stately, built of stone, something that probably attracted a lot of attention during the day when the town was full. Reynitz opened a door and we went into the house through the dark garage. Beyond that, we stepped into a kitchen, and the heat was such a relief I stopped being scared for just a moment. He opened a drawer, and from it he took a tall candle, which he lit. He didn't quite look as he had in the photos I'd seen on the Internet. He seemed older and more frail. We couldn't turn on the lights, he said, because someone would see. That was the extent of the pleasantries.

This is the point where things began to happen very fast. I followed Reynitz through a sitting room, and then we emerged into the dining room with its high ceilings and fine art on the walls. He didn't ask for me to sit down. He stood beside the table and looked at me across it, holding the candle. He asked me very plainly if I recalled a paper I had written in 1996 debunking the contents of a book entitled *Transcriptions of Markings Found Within the Tomb of the Witch Gaspard Signac*. Of course I had; it had taken me two years to research and write that paper on that infamous scholarly work published in 1766. The frightening myths that had been born because of those transcriptions were legendary, and, I deduced, almost entirely devoid of merit.

Reynitz's second question to me was if I was absolutely convinced of my findings. I said yes, I was. Did I think, he asked me, it was *impossible* that anything in that book could produce the effects the inscriptions described, if the person who'd read them possessed enough knowledge and dedication? I said no. I was sure of it. Gaspard Signac had been a murderer, but the things he'd written had been the work of someone who used the *reputation* of sorcery more than he'd been able to use sorcery itself.

Reynitz nodded. There was a heavy winter coat hung on one of the chairs near him, and he set the candle down and put it on. I prepared to go out into the cold again. Before we started moving, he looked at me in that eerie semi-darkness and told me that there was a strong chance that I would not be able to see what I had come here for. He believed it depended on whether one man who had been living the day before was now dead. I thought immediately of that body in the woods, and for a second I was certain I was looking at the serial killer who had destroyed the town of Cabell.

Who is it? I asked him, and Reynitz said, my son. My son, he said, owned a copy of the transcriptions. He had paid a year's worth of his trust fund to contract for someone to steal it from the antiquities museum at the University of Queensland. In that moment I decided that if Reynitz came near me, made any sort of move toward me, I would run. I would run not back from where we came but deeper into the house, and I would find a door out of here, and if I had to attack Reynitz, hit him with the wrench I still held in my hand, I would do it.

But he kept his distance, and he turned and started walking out of the room without even asking me to follow. I did. We went into the front foyer. The door leading out of the house was right there. Reynitz turned in the other direction, though. There were big sliding glass doors that looked out on the rear of the property, past a stone porch bordered by tall pillars. Reynitz undid a wooden latch and slid one of the doors open, letting the cold air in. The wind snuffed out his candle, and he left it on a sill. He stepped outside and turned to me. I followed him, but I would not allow him to wait for me to move past him. That would have gotten me too close. He seemed to understand this, so he moved out onto the porch without me. I stepped through the door and slid the door shut behind us.

The rear of the property was not much more than a wide, open field bordering the trees, and what was obviously a large in-ground swimming pool bordered by a brick patio. That was where Reynitz went. He stopped twenty feet from the edge of the pool. I stood nearby. He spoke again. He told me that his son hated him beyond all imagining. When his hatred had reached the point of madness, and he realized his father was the one person on earth he could not kill, things had spun out of control. 'But there was a way to punish me,' Reynitz said, 'if one had the right books and the will to do it.' He told me if I looked into the pool and saw nothing, it meant his son was already dead, had finally killed himself as he had said he would in a letter sent four days before, which would represent the final blow against his father.

'Go ahead and look,' Reynitz said. I moved toward the edge of the pool, which was uncovered. Leaves blew all around its edges and over the sides. I could see at first only that it was empty of all water, a barren cement pit ten feet deep almost all around. Then I got to the very edge. My first impression was that the streaks and spatters of dried blood on the interior walls of the pool were almost black, suggesting the passage of time. The same was true for the blood that had pooled around the bodies strewn on the bottom of the pool. I didn't count them at first because of the shock, but eventually as the beam of my flashlight moved across them all, I did come to see that there were seventeen. There they all were, though of course those bodies had in reality long since been recovered elsewhere by the authorities. Men, women, and children, in most cases with their throats cut, some partially dismembered. Some face down, some face up, staring blankly at the sky. One man, whose photograph, like those of the others, had been broadcast across the country, had been bound tightly with rope, one of his hands severed. It lay close by him, having gone entirely gray. The greatest distance between any two corpses was perhaps ten feet. They lay there in the clothes they had been murdered in, clothes caked in dried blood, so much of it that it seemed impossible.

I stared at the scene, unable to move, until I heard Reynitz speak from behind me. This illusion, Reynitz said, was learned from the book I had so carefully discredited, but the killings themselves could only be done by hand, the hand of his son. And the illusion would remain right here to punish the father who had failed so badly, been so abusive, as long as the man who'd created it, and the one who it tortured, drew breath. 'Go now,' Reynitz said, pointing to the trees. 'I'm finally calling the police.'

I began to move across the wide lawn, away from the mansion. I saw Reynitz take out his cellphone and begin to dial. And so I began to run. I got to the trees, which represented the thin border between the property and the bottom of Poplar Street, and I did look back then. I saw Reynitz's silhouette standing there still, having completed his call, and I saw him doing something with his arms, holding something above him, some object, and then there was a flash of yellow light and a soft thumping sound as his entire body suddenly went up in flame. I could

see the gas can drop beside the pool and Reynitz collapse there. He tumbled into the pool and out of sight, though the glow of the flames remained.

They didn't find anything in that pool but the charred remains of Raymond Reynitz. Aside from these notes, I won't be telling the story for years, not until my study of *Transcriptions of Markings Found Within the Tomb of the Witch Gaspard Signac* has been taken up again and pursued much more intensely. I proved once that the book could not be used to raise demons, and I still think I was right. But its power to teach the summoning of intense and terrifying visions as a means to curse one's enemy is something I've apparently underestimated.

I have a lot of work and research and travel ahead of me. It starts tomorrow after the burial of Patrick Reynitz, who killed himself at about the same moment his father did, leaving behind all the evidence they needed in order to pronounce him the killer who had caused an entire American town to flee into the night. They found his body inside an empty warehouse on the grounds of the quarry where he worked, the one on the edge of Cabell. Judging by the presence of many extinguished cigarettes, he'd been sitting in the dark and looking through a window up at his father's mansion for hours, having just murdered his final victim, and perhaps briefly confused by the appearance outside of a man holding a cross wrench and moving uncertainly through the quiet maze of abandoned and silent structures.

sounds

My name is Kenneth Vilma. December 17, 2010, marked the third day of my escape from Grovenor Penitentiary in Crystalis, Michigan, and my second day in the Wolf Paw State Forest with another convict, Ron Heil. We'd been on the run since paying off two guards to help us escape during a work detail on the side of Interstate 60. Our plan had been to move on foot for three days until we reached a safe house in the farming town of Lemus. To reach it we had to take a complicated route through miles of woods on the first night and then enter the state forest, careful to avoid any marked trails, which slowed us down more than we had thought it would.

Ron had planned the route based on one guard's knowledge and mapmaking attempt of the area; he'd grown up in the southern part of the state. We figured the search for us wouldn't extend too deeply into the forest, since it was by far the most laborious way to get anywhere, but to guarantee our safety we had been willing to endure the cold hike for as long as it took. We slept pressed against logs that first night, shivering in the thin clothes we had worn under our prison fatigues. We hadn't been able to fortify ourselves with anything more so as not to

arouse suspicion when being transported to the work detail. We had forty dollars in cash each, and Ron was carrying a disposable cellphone that he would use for exactly one call, to be placed to his contact at the safe house in Lemus when we got close to it. The escape had cost us all the money we had in the world. So far, at least, we had gotten lucky. We'd counted on the guards to give conflicting reports about where we seemed to be headed when the escape happened on the side of the road, and when night fell we saw only two helicopters in the sky and felt no real threat of discovery.

We hiked through the cold, eating only granola bars and beef jerky. It snowed two inches as I slept while Ron kept watch. When I woke up I was as cold as I've ever been in my life, and I couldn't stop shivering. But we just had to keep moving. We warmed up as the twenty-mile-long second day progressed, but we both dreaded that second night. The guard had marked a shack on the map that he remembered, and it was still there, nothing more than a hollow wooden structure built by and for hunters but no longer used since hunting had been outlawed in this section of the forest. We were taking an enormous chance going in there, since it was the most obvious place to look for two men on the run, and so we spent only half the night inside it.

For the rest of the night we huddled against one another in a deep ravine, hunched tight under a natural rock overhang where only a little snow had gathered, but sleep wouldn't come. The wind was too high. I worried about frostbite and pneumonia. We went through the spare pairs of socks we'd smuggled out, and the work gloves we wore helped some, but the snow on the ground got our clothes wet, and that was a killer. I had a continuous sharp pain in my left thigh in addition to my being simply exhausted. Ron was stronger than I was, and I almost resented him for it. He'd also been smart enough to let his hair grow as long as he could get it before the escape, as our thin hats weren't as much help as I'd hoped.

When I finally did drift off just a little before dawn, I had the most frightening dream of my life. In it there was a man standing far away in the middle of a huge patch of rolling farmland under a full moon. I couldn't see his face, but I knew this was the man who I'd had a small hand in killing six years ago. I hadn't pulled the trigger, only helped to bury him in the middle of the night when he'd shot himself because of his involvement with me and four other men who'd pressured him into embezzling a hundred thousand dollars from a union treasury. I'd held his suicide note in my hand and burned it. I didn't have to read it first, but I had, and I would never forget the strange drawings he'd made in the margins: incoherent doodles he'd retraced several times in black ink when he'd probably stopped to collect his thoughts before writing more words that implicated us all. One of the doodles had been a pair of eyes—wide, staring eyes. Another had been of a dragon. In my dream, the man was pointing up into the night sky, wanting me to look. The sky was filled with strange red clouds coming together to make the sinister dragon from his suicide note. And then it ended.

By the beginning of day three I could tell Ron was considering altering our direction so we could maybe find a place to get some new clothes and a meal, but we stuck to the plan, walking along with hands clamped over our ears to protect them better. We were going to be at the safe house by nightfall. The day was gloomy and overcast, and it looked like more snow was coming. We decided to follow the John Adams Trail for a while, which was taking a chance, but we were becoming too sick and exhausted to keep on going parallel to it. We didn't see anyone at all. It felt like we were alone in the forest.

I have been deaf since birth, and it had taken a lot to convince Ron Heil to include me in the escape attempt he'd mostly arranged. We'd known each other at Grovenor for almost three years. We had always communicated with paper and pen, and on our slog through the forest he'd brought along a black marker and ten blank white index cards to write messages to me whenever he needed to. It was a primitive system, but it worked. At about two o'clock on the 17th he wrote his first message of the day to me. There had only been three total since the escape. His message consisted of only two words: *helicopters* and *lots*. He pointed up at the sky and crouched down off the trail for a bit, frowning. I couldn't see anything up there; the helicopters he heard weren't passing directly overhead.

Ron was motionless for such a long time that I tapped the ground to get his attention and looked at him quizzically. He just held up one finger to suggest that I wait. There must have been still more helicopters going overhead. Ron scanned the sky suspiciously. Finally it seemed okay to move on. Based on the duration of our stop, I began to get very worried. Maybe the search had suddenly intensified. Maybe we'd been seen, or maybe the guards had revealed our plan. I couldn't imagine any other reason for such an apparent gathering of choppers. When Ron began to move again, it was no faster or slower than normal, but we decided without any real consultation to abandon the trail. We were going to have to be even more careful as we got close to the safe house.

I began to feel a little safer when an hour passed and we stopped to eat what I guess had to be called lunch. After that, we were entirely out of food, which was the least of my worries. According to Ron's cellphone, it was 3:30. He checked our map and wrote a message on it to the effect that we had another six or seven hours at the most. The moment he finished making his last letter on the map, he looked up again. He pulled out the index card he'd written an hour before and tapped it. This time I did see two helicopters go overhead, but they were at very high altitude. We were sitting in a carved-out section of rock and couldn't be seen from above, so we wouldn't be spotted in that moment. Still, it felt like we were being closed in on.

The wind picked up as we went, blowing snow. For all we knew a major snowstorm was coming. It truly felt like it. We walked a little faster. There was still not even a flurry, but I was scared. If the snow came down hard, we might be facing another night in the woods, and I didn't know if I could take it. My breathing had become scratchy and labored; my lungs were working too hard. I could see but not hear Ron coughing from time to time, and he didn't look well at all. If anyone in the forest saw us, they would think we were homeless. That is, if they hadn't seen our photos on TV by then.

It was about four and the sky was noticeably losing light when we saw the dead deer near the John Adams Trail. I noticed something up ahead, and very quickly I realized an animal had been gotten to, but the extent of it didn't come into view until it was too late. There were three deer near a wide part of the trail, almost a clearing, and they had been torn apart. Completely. Some wild animal had taken them all down. The blood of the animals was the only color in the forest, which otherwise was nothing but gray, black, and white.

The scene was such a mess that we didn't even want to walk through it. A dog pack, maybe, or coyotes in the area. Civilization wasn't more than four or five miles on either side of us, but there was every sort of animal in these woods. We saw that parts of the deer were missing. They clearly weren't all there. We couldn't help but stare, it had been such a massacre. We took a long detour around the deer and picked our way through the trees. The last part of that weird,

gruesome puzzle that I saw was a deer's head, a good hundred feet beyond the scene of the attack. It occurred to me as we went on that a low-flying helicopter would see a spray of red in a jagged circle in the woods and might go in even closer to have a look. But I refused to believe that after all we had planned and been through, we could be caught. I wouldn't let myself be caught or ever go back to prison. It was unthinkable.

We stumbled forward. Just three minutes later I was so focused on just putting one foot in front of the other that I didn't notice Ron had stopped entirely. Naturally I couldn't hear his footsteps cease. He was standing there, looking at me. I shrugged, and he got out the index cards from the vest pocket of his lumberjack shirt again. He wrote the word *sirens* on one and pointed behind us; then, after a moment's thought, he pointed off in another direction too. We stood rooted in place. He added the words *far away* to his note, barely legible. He had begun to shiver. The wind was strong; our clothes were freezing to us. I began to despair then. I had underestimated the lengths the law had gone to in order to find us. I waited for Ron to start moving and followed him. He was looking at the map intensely. He stopped very soon and waved me over to him. He traced a finger along the map and showed me how if we got back on the John Adams Trail now we could obviously save a lot of time, and traced his index finger off it at one point to show how we would diverge from it about a mile from our destination.

He looked at me, waiting for some kind of response. His eyes had gotten wide like they sometimes did when he became a little frenzied, overly intense about something. Sometimes I could see the anger there; how frightening it might become, and *had* become to bring him to Grovenor for a seven-year sentence for battery, his third conviction for it. His breath billowed out of his mouth. At some point he'd gotten a deep scratch on his neck, probably from a passing branch, and blood was frozen to it. Without thinking too much about our options, I nodded. Just moving fast felt good. We had to try it. The clouds overhead were ominous, and it was getting dark.

Ten minutes went by, and the woods only got deeper. We'd made a navigational mistake. Ron kept shaking his head, and I saw that he was getting more and more frustrated. We'd just seen the trail when coming across the deer, but we'd lost it now in our attempt to shortcut our way over to it, and it felt like we were veering off. We stood there and looked around. There was no sign of a true break in the trees, nothing. To our right the terrain plummeted downward dramatically into a deep ravine. Ron pointed with some confidence after a while, and we started again. I saw him utter a string of profanity, and he motioned that he was hearing more helicopters. This time I again saw two of them going overhead. I couldn't tell what kind they were, but there were no searchlights.

It started to snow, very lightly. We finally caught a break, though. Suddenly the slowest and smallest part of the Dry Gun River, which ran parallel to the John Adams Trail in this part of the forest, appeared on our left, where according to the map it became Rickendale's Stream, and I felt safer somehow now that we were on the right track. The map told us there was only one direction we could move upon hitting it, west, and at some point the waterbed would become thin enough to cross to the trail. Before we reached that junction, though, there was another frightening sight. Ron pointed it out. I would have spotted it much sooner but for my deafness.

A speedboat was moving quickly, too quickly, down this woodsy, quiet, and shallow portion of the stream where it would have been dangerous to even kayak too quickly. The second I saw it I pressed myself against a tree, and so did Ron, safely out of sight. There were two men in the speedboat, and they never even came close to spotting us because their attention was riveted

on the other side of the stream. One was guiding the speedboat while dangerously looking through a pair of binoculars, while the other man had one foot on the side of the boat as if he were ready to leap off at any second. He was holding a shotgun. They were intently looking for something, most likely us. They were gone quickly. At their rate of speed an accident was bound to happen.

Our morale plummeted once more. Ron had removed his gloves to try to dry them in his back pockets, and even in the growing dark I could see how discolored his fingers had become. Mine were almost as bad, and the feeling in two of them was fading fast. The snow did not thicken, thank God, but there was that awful wind, consistent and bitter. We decided silently to keep going down the river. Thinking back on it, it was the worst possible thing we could have done if we wanted to remain unspotted. It was as if we had a mutual understanding that we didn't have the strength or belief in attaining our freedom anymore to improvise.

The sky above us had finally become a deep blue when we got the greatest shock so far. It felt like we were making good steady progress, at least, walking side by side now, close to each other, trying somehow to feel warm. Our hands were balled into fists against the cold and crossed over our chests, sometimes curled up inside our hats for any kind of extra warmth. My ears stung badly every time the wind kicked up. At some point we raised our heads simultaneously and saw a man walking towards us. He had a dog on a leash. We might have walked right past him if we had just been a little slower to look up. He was raising a hand to us. What he was doing out in the gathering dark we didn't know, but his presence told us that the trail was very close, and we had probably reached the outer edge of Lemus. We might have been able to see houses on the ridge far above us had we focused on it.

Ron and I stopped beside the man so as not to generate any suspicion. His dog seemed disinterested in us. The man, who was about fifty, began speaking right away. He seemed completely unconcerned with our decrepit condition, but that would have been less obvious in the dark. Ron gestured that I was deaf, which shocked me because it was such an identifier if the man had been watching the news. The man nodded in understanding and explained something to Ron, who listened carefully. They fell into conversation while I could only watch, incredibly frustrated. I was about to beckon for the pen and the index cards when Ron took them and wrote for almost a minute, crossing a couple of things out, while the man continued to speak. The words Ron wrote down for me, which I had to squint to read in the near dark, were these: *Police in the area - shooting - telling people to stay indoors - no one knows what's going on.*

The stranger finally went on his way after seeming to ask what we were doing out here in the woods, to which Ron responded with an explanation, at one point actually forcing out a laugh as if we were just out on a lark. I read those words on the index card again as we watched the man move on. Ron consulted the map again and pointed out exactly where he thought we were. We probably had an hour left of walking, maybe less. We were both very confused. That word—shooting—made everything not make sense. But there was no time to stand and re-evaluate what had come before; we had to move. Somehow I felt confident that the stranger hadn't recognized us. There had been no glimmer of it that I could see from his face.

There were ten more minutes of brisk walking. At one point we saw distant lights through the trees, which might have meant the edge of a residential neighborhood. I wanted so badly to go

towards them at any cost. They faded at some point when the stream curved away from the east, and then we were embedded in the forest again. The stream hooked sharply, and we left it entirely for good, hoping the trail would be just up ahead. Then Ron and I both slowed down at the same time. I was reacting to him, or so I thought; he might have been reacting to me. I had slowed just because of a sense I had about something up ahead. Just a sense. Maybe my other senses were becoming heightened because of my wracked nerves.

I had been eyeing something up ahead on the left, a large shadowy form at first, then what was obviously the remains of an abandoned structure of some kind. Even in the dark we could see right away that it was nothing we had to be concerned about. Years ago, decades from the look of it, someone had built a large cement foundation out here in the middle of nowhere and then never moved forward with construction. The foundation cut a hollow into the earth. Rotting cement bricks rose in uneven columns. Some parts of the first floor of the house rose as much as ten feet off the ground, and there were window cutouts in front, while other parts didn't go nearly that high. The bricks were black with moss, crumbling, and graffiti defaced every part of it. Maybe it was going to be a shelter or something built by the Department of Natural Resources; maybe an entrance to the forest had been planned.

Ron was on my left, and he almost bumped into me veering strangely away from the structure, which was about fifty feet away. We were separated from it by a thin row of trees. We stopped and looked at it. My sense that something was wrong was confirmed when Ron suddenly flinched and took a step backwards, touching my arm. I looked at his face, willing him to look at me, but he was staring at that foundation, not even noticing that the trail was visible just beyond it. He glanced at me briefly and then motioned that he wanted to take a closer look. Before he took another step he wrote down three more quick words on an index card. By now he could barely write, his hands were in such bad shape, and I could just barely make out the words. They said: *Hear something weird*. I pointed at the trail, but it was as if he didn't even see me. He wanted to take just a few steps toward that foundation. I hung back, my breathing pluming in front of my face. Ron took two steps forward, and then he stopped again. He leaned forward a little and turned his head. He was listening to something. But there was certainly nothing moving that I could see, staring through the jagged holes where windows were once planned. He took one more step.

My heart was racing now. I couldn't believe he was doing this, that we weren't plowing past this place as fast as we could, but he seemed powerless to break away. He was frowning, disturbed by what he was hearing. And then he flinched again, more drastically this time, because something had quite quickly decided him. His whole body shook once, just once, like there had been a jolt of sound nearby that he wasn't expecting. He pointed past me and made a motion toward the west, and he was past me in the blink of an eye and moving very fast, not quite running toward a part of the trail that required us to ascend a slight slope instead of getting onto it at a point nearer the foundation. I followed, looking behind me, but there was nothing visible in that thing as it diminished in size behind us. Ron waved at me frantically to keep up with him, but again, he stopped just short of a run, trotting instead through the snow, as if he were trying not to panic me or himself.

We clambered up the slope and hit the trail, turning to the west. Ron let me catch up a little, throwing a quick look behind him, and made a hand gesture to suggest we had to keep trotting. I didn't know how much my lungs could take, but something had scared him very badly. My first thought was that he had heard a bear, which were common where we were, or maybe voices, or he'd panicked because he thought people were there looking for us. What scared me

far worse was that Ron never stopped moving at that pace. The wind battered us worse and worse, and during one especially nasty gust I reached out for his arm and urged him to stop, tapping my chest and shaking my head. Reluctantly he did so, staring back down the trail into the dark. He let me catch my breath. Then he reached forward, grabbed my shoulders, and got his face close to mine to seize my attention. It was then that he physically pushed me forward.

I understood at that moment how urgent the situation was, and we started again. This time I made a conscious decision not to look behind me. I would just run. In my panic I actually got a little bit ahead of Ron. I think now that I was trying to show him I understood the situation and I would not let him down, so I led the way, keeping my eyes rooted on the path. I became aware of seemingly random patches on my body that had no feeling at all anymore: a part of my left thigh, a patch of skin on my back. I locked my eyes on the trail so as not to lose it, moving fast, and tried to mentally will my blood to circulate faster, to stave off the frostbite.

I can't say exactly how long I led us. I slowed only when the wind kicked up, bending the trees in every direction, and once when my right foot connected painfully with a branch on the ground. I would guess I kept my focus for five or six minutes, and then the pain in my lungs just got too great. I remember looking up into the sky and noticing how quickly full dark had come. Then a pain hit my side, and I turned to gesture to Ron that I had to slow down. But Ron wasn't there when I turned. He was gone. I looked around rapidly left and right, but there was no sign of him. I was in a thick stretch of woods, and visibility had become minimal. The trail disappeared into nothingness. I waited no more than thirty seconds, and then I began to backtrack, staring down at the snow and my footprints, the only ones on the trail. The wind, though, so constant now, was blurring them, and I had to bend closer to the ground to decipher them. Every time the wind surged it made it more difficult to track my path. I kept going, but there was no sign of Ron's prints for some time. Finally I came across an area where everything was lost in a patch where the snow had been disturbed in several places. I saw a very tiny glow in the snow and bent down to pick up the cellphone that Ron had been carrying. It was freezing cold to the touch, caked in snow, but it was still working. At some point, I didn't know when, he had turned it on. And now he was gone.

I could see nothing in the trees. We had been on level ground, so there had been no sudden fall in the dark into a ravine or depression. I was irrationally afraid to make any sound, but I cried out for Ron and waited. And waited. I went into the trees on both sides of the trail, but fear kept me from going too deep. I looked for signs that he had been dragged off somehow, but visually it just wasn't possible. It was just too dark, and there was too much wind. I cried out just once more. My hands were claws, my fingers losing sensation. My ears and my nose stung painfully. Snow was clinging to my face where the wind had tossed it, and parts of my cheeks had become painful as well.

I wanted to turn the cellphone off just to crush its feeble glow, because it made me feel visible, exposed. But first I managed to call up the only phone number stored in its memory, and I pressed send. After a moment I saw the word *connected* appear. Unable from birth to form clear words, I said nothing. It was only a desperate attempt to send some sort of communication to the safe house. I cut the call off and turned and headed forward again. As I went I attempted to send a text message, carefully pressing each letter as I went, trying to navigate while I did so, no longer running. Ron's disappearance made capture seem finally acceptable. I staggered forward, typing out *Help - one mile away*. Then I put the phone into my pocket and tried to run

again. Having no map, it seemed useless, but I ran anyway until my lungs screamed once again. I saw no lights through the trees, no sign that I was close to anything at all.

Help did not come. There was no answer to my text message, none. From time to time as I moved I looked back, hoping Ron would appear. There was only darkness behind me. I would say I walked for another full hour, unable to think about anything as the wind pummeled me, before I finally sank to one knee on the trail, squeezing my eyes tight. In my weakened mental state I decided I would go for five more minutes, just five more, counting the seconds in my head as I went. If in five minutes I didn't receive a sign that there was hope, if Ron didn't emerge from the dark or there were no lights or at least a weakening of the awful wind, I would lay down and give up, just go to sleep and let fate take over. My five minutes began, and though I lost track of the seconds, I only counted down about halfway before my miracle happened. Looking up to my right, I saw a ridge through the trees, and they grew so thin in their relentless columns that I knew what I was seeing was a break in the forest. I got off the trail and climbed a long, gradual upslope, slipping twice. When I got to the top, the forest simply ended.

I was standing at the edge of a long, undulating snow-covered field. Beyond it, in the distance, was another line of trees that marched to the north and had been carefully planted to separate one section of the field from the next. This was farmland. I saw no houses, but I walked toward that line of trees, my heart beating fast. It wasn't the safe house I was after, since I had no idea where that might be, but rather any sign of humankind. Past that first row of trees was another, even bigger field, but as soon as I entered it, I saw the shape of a house far away, through another copse of trees. Snow blew into my eyes, but the shape was unmistakable. I just had to make it there, one foot in front of the other. As I grew closer it proved not to be a mirage. It was a small, one-story house on the edge of someone's property. It sat right on the edge of the forest. Thinking about it now, I understand that I could have made it to the property much sooner, had I realized it was there, by cutting through the forest to it. Instead I had continued down the John Adams Trail for another half-mile out of my way, then slowly curved back, losing perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes. I parted the patch of trees, and I had made it to the house.

The fields that stretched beyond it ran to the horizon far away. The forest surrounded the property to the east, and the house was cut off from any road, all alone. There were no vehicles around, nothing, but the house was in good shape. No lights were on inside. I climbed onto the tiny porch and pounded on the door. There was no answer. That was all right. I would break a window and get inside, and though the house might be vacant or even abandoned, I would be warmer. Maybe there would be food. I turned to my right to the ground-level window. I would have to get off the porch and go around it to get to it. I descended the three wooden steps to the frozen ground. At that moment the wind from the north rose and nearly knocked me over with its force. Dead leaves skittered across the open field, striking my legs. I leaned into the wind. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something above me move.

There was something on the roof of the house, something that had been hanging off the edge and was now being pushed off entirely by the wind. The thing, what at first I thought was a bag of grain or charcoal or peat or something, descended and crashed to the snow ten feet away from me. I walked over to it. It was a body, a dead man. He lay face up on the snow. I would say he was between sixty and seventy years old, not dressed for the cold—no jacket, no gloves, no hat—as if he'd been drawn outside not expecting to be there long. His eyes were open, staring into the sky. His cause of death was obvious right away from the strange contortion of his body. He had almost been cut in half by something. I backed away from the man. I had seen before something staining the snow nearby and now realized it was blood, this man's blood, which had

soaked through the snow in front of the house before he had wound up somehow on the edge of the roof. Placed there or thrown there somehow. I regarded the silent house, which seemed so empty. Paranoid, I then turned to face the fields that rolled away from it into the horizon.

This is the image I will never forget as long as I live. Snow-covered farmland stretched gently upwards into the distance; another farmhouse, nothing more than a dot far, far away on another property. A line of trees was more than a half-mile away to the west. Brilliant stars dotted the colorless night sky. To me it was all a silent tableau, perfectly peaceful, like a painting of a Christmas night somewhere in the Midwest. And halfway between me and that horizon, something sat in the middle of a field not more than a hundred yards away. Something large, the size of a large car I would say. It was too dark to really see it at first despite the full moon and the brilliant snow glare. But as my eyes locked in on it, I saw details. It was a living thing, a creature. Curled up tightly in the field. It wasn't moving, nor was it dead. I could make out a very dark body, with something surrounding it that looked like a thick tail. As I say: the size of a large car. The way it was curled up, it was so much like the image of a sleeping cat or dog. I then spotted something in the woods far beyond it. There were little bits of light moving there, incredibly tiny. First just two, then four, then many more than that. Human beings, each carrying a flashlight.

As I stood rooted in place, the thing in the field awoke. I saw it raise its head very slowly, though in which direction it was looking I couldn't tell. The head was flat and rectangular. Those flashlights and the people holding them, dozens of them now, were going to emerge from the woods at any moment. They were maybe two football fields away from the thing. As I have said, I was closer. The creature began to move. Its upper body rose further, and what I was looking at was snakelike, but then it unfolded gigantic arms, one on each side of its body, and they stabilized the body by clamping the ground. That was when the head turned slowly towards me. I couldn't make out its actual eyes, but it seemed as if it really had none, just a pair of deep sockets with nothing in them. But that was surely just a trick of the dark, and the distance. There was a hideous moment where we were connected visually, me and this thing that had crawled or climbed or descended from someplace unknown. But it couldn't have been what Ron had sensed in the forest; it couldn't have been that fast. My last conscious thought was that this was not the only creature roaming the forest that night.

The thing's torso, fully extended, rose probably ten feet off the ground. Given the choice to move toward the people in the woods or move toward me, it chose the latter option. Its lower half began to slither in my direction. Its arms released their tight grip on the earth. I turned and ran onto the porch and, assuming the front door would be locked, threw my weight as hard as I could against it. The door buckled against the frame but did not give. I turned the knob and yes, it was locked. I shoved my numb right fist through the windowpane above the knob and felt bones break. I switched hands, flailing about with my left until I could turn the knob from inside and open the door. I remember pushing it inwards. I remember the darkness inside, and seeing a pair of boots on a wooden floor. Then I dared to turn my head one last time. The creature had covered almost the entire distance and was perhaps twenty yards away from the porch. Its black body was fully extended as it slithered over the snow. I saw it for one second and then I was inside the house. And that is absolutely the last thing I remember.

The trauma of whatever happened next is buried somewhere deep in my mind. The doctors don't think it will ever come for me, even in my dreams. They think I'm safe from ever remembering what I experienced in the seconds after I got into the farmhouse. But they don't know for sure. I was not returned to Grovenor Penitentiary. I live now in Constantine Hospital

in the state of Ohio. I was moved here for a time because it has special facilities for physically handicapped prisoners. I lost an arm and a leg that night. In addition, three toes on my left foot were taken by frostbite. No one ever told me how they saved my life. I told them not to tell me anything. I read the accounts of that day's events and the death of Ron Heil and three other people and the search for witnesses who could describe the creature, or creatures, that appeared in the southern part of the state and then disappeared.

When I awoke in the hospital two days after the attack, one of the policemen brought me a pen and a piece of paper and asked if I could try to describe what I remembered of the thing that had come for me. My hands were still being treated for frostbite, which would have made writing difficult enough. Making it almost impossible was that I had retreated so deeply into my own mind for protection from my memories that I didn't even fully understand where, or even who, I was. Apparently I took the pen and, before I slipped into unconsciousness again, was able to scrawl only a single, jagged word, and that word was: *claws*.

house

My name is Aramis Churchton. On December 14, 2004, I came to the town of Belconsin, Maryland, in order to spend a night in a tenantless house on a quiet road. It was a three-hour drive from the western part of the state, and I arrived shortly after 10 p.m., parking my car almost a half-mile away. I walked onto the property and went around to the back of the house unnoticed, as it sat on seven acres of fairly isolated scrubland. The previous owners, the Marclay family, had left a month before, after their daughter was kidnapped. The nearest neighbor was screened off by a thick stretch of trees to the east. The temperature when I arrived was slightly less than thirty degrees. I broke into the basement door with a crowbar and entered the house. The Marclays had left the heat on inside, and it was comfortably warm. I removed the flashlight from my backpack and shone it in front of me as I walked through the house. I did not want to turn any lights on yet for fear of drawing unwanted attention.

The house was large and fully furnished. Everywhere there was evidence of a normal family life, and no obvious signs that it had been interrupted by tragedy. The house had three bedrooms. One of them was Glory Marclay's. She was seven years old when she was abducted in the middle of the night. A ransom note had been left behind, written by a man who only called himself 'Swan.' Nothing had been touched in her bedroom. It was filled with her drawings and possessions. I looked through every room in the house: the study, the playroom, the three bathrooms, the kitchen. In there, I studied a picture fastened with a magnet to the refrigerator. Glory had created it in red and green crayon. It showed a girl in a ruffled dress carrying an archer's quill on her back and holding a giant bow. Glory had signed it below the girl's feet. I then went back down to the basement, where I felt the house's presence the strongest. I had

little to do but wait. I decided to pass the time by reading the notes my colleague Savid Doud had made since July regarding potential investigations we would soon embark upon. I fully expected Theodore Gantt's ghost to appear in some form before too many hours had passed. I had brought no monitoring equipment so as not to frighten him away.

Almost immediately after I settled in, there were three sharp, evenly spaced raps against the basement door. I rose from the chair I was sitting in and walked into the tiny alcove where the door was. I couldn't see anything through the pane of glass set at eye level because there was too much frost. So I opened the door. I looked up the narrow flight of cement steps that led up to ground level and saw nothing there. The knocking had most likely been a simple physical preamble from the ghost I had come to Belconsin to encounter.

His full name was Theodore Jarrell Gantt, and he had bought the house in 1968 after his wife, Zoya, died under mysterious circumstances. She had suffered a sudden heart attack at the age of forty-one. It was the expression on her face that gave the paramedics pause. Her teeth had been clenched as if in anger, biting so hard on her upper lip she had punctured the skin there. Nor would they forget the bizarre way her eyes had become somehow disconnected within their sockets. They rolled like loose marbles as they carried her away. Theodore Gantt had been discharged from the army in 1944 as a section eight. He was observed by three different psychiatrists who all found him utterly delusional. He had been stationed with the Afrika Corps, but after his discharge he did not return to the states for over three years, disappearing instead into the forests south of Zaire. It was believed that he spent those years deeply involved in the study of the witchcraft practices of the Gy Chulthu, a primal tribe to whom zombification was an everyday practice. His private papers mentioned extensive experiments with cannibalism while he lived inside that little-seen community. Only after his death, when those private letters and papers were opened, was the extent of his psychosis revealed.

He kept over two thousand pages of diaries and a huge number of notebooks between 1941 and 1973. The diaries were found in a sealed room by Gantt's brother, Bernard, who took custody of Theodore's two children in 1973. Theodore believed that in Africa he had become a walpurdym, a kind of brain vampire who killed in order to eat the minds of his victims, in the belief that the amassed intelligence would grow and grow inside him. Theodore claimed in the diaries that he had no control over this affliction, and also that he had killed eleven people since 1948, eating their brains and dumping the bodies in a nearby river after they were dead. The diaries hinted that Theodore hatched plans to poison his wife over the course of six months, and he did actually commit this deed after she found some incriminating evidence of his crimes and confronted him with his delusion. After Theodore Gantt's suicide, his brother Bernard, a prominent local businessman, found the diaries and turned them over to the police. The papers were then lost, never to be recovered.

Bernard took care of his brother's children for just two years, and then he himself died in a fall from a ladder in 1975. The children became wards of the state until they legally inherited his fortune. They moved far away. I had not been able to find out what became of them. Theodore Gantt vowed in his diaries that he would haunt the house he owned after his death in order to protect his papers from probing outsiders. Those papers of course weren't inside the house anymore. They had long since been confiscated by the police, and quite probably destroyed. Neighbors and those who had occasionally occupied this house over the past three decades had in the past noted strange noises and odd human shapes within at various times. Before the

Marclay family bought it in 2002, the house had attained a joking reputation as a haunted place. The most well-known urban legend was that if one looked through the window of the east bedroom, which looked out on faraway Route 212, you could sometimes see a heavysset, bespectacled man standing by the road. He would place his hands over his face and sink to his knees, and then mysteriously disappear. Because this sort of sighting had on occasion been attributed to children, there was reason for extra caution when I began my investigation.

Between 10:30 and 11 p.m., I did little inside the house but stand for several minutes in the center of the dark living room. I listened to the almost undetectable subtone the house gave off for signs that its energy level was migrating toward any particular area. It didn't seem so, but there was a slight change in the tone inside Glory Marclay's bedroom. It was there that I chose to perform an attraction. I sat down at the little girl's tiny red desk and settled onto the blue wooden chair beside it, which had been designed for a human one-third my size. I switched on the table lamp. Atop the desk there was a Mickey Mouse pencil cup, a sketch pad, and a calendar showing a different sort of horse for every month. I moved these things out of the way and set my backpack on the desk, along with a glass of water.

From the pack I removed a charcoal pencil. Sensing something, I turned to look at Glory Marclay's small bed. On the coverlet lay three dolls. I noticed for the first time that the room was filled with them. There were giraffes, dogs, dinosaurs, fashion models, infants, cowgirls, and astronauts. For some reason, the three dolls sitting on the bed, staring in my direction, were the ones with the largest eyes. I began to rub the tip of the pencil back and forth across my open left palm so that the charcoal marked my skin. Then I continued in the other direction, cross-hatching. Soon my palm was entirely black. I sat the pencil down and made a tight fist with my left hand. I closed my eyes, and they remained closed for the next ten minutes. Slowly I tightened my fist more and more, until my nails were digging into my palm and my muscles began to tremble. I could feel the temperature inside the house climb by two or three degrees as I performed the attraction. When I finally thought it was time to open my eyes, I unclenched my fist. Virtually all of the charcoal had vanished from my hand. It had left behind only a string of tall, thin black letters. The letters had made this message on my flesh:

He m my k ll he

I stared at these letters for the better part of twenty minutes. I could not fill in the gaps between the letters with anything that made immediate sense. I eventually transcribed the sequence onto a piece of paper and placed it inside the pocket of my shirt. I left the charcoal markings on my palm as well. I heard the wind picking up severely outside the house. With the heat cut off, the temperature inside it should have been falling, but the thermometer I had brought with me showed otherwise. It had actually climbed two degrees. The temperature in the basement was identical to other locations above ground. I had hoped for this. It was a positive sign.

I had my first visitor at 12:40 a.m. I had been standing in the furnished basement, looking at several photographs of the Marclay family that had been set up on top of a small stereo system. Mrs. Marclay had been a stern-faced woman in her forties, and the photographic progression showed that she had lost a great deal of weight over the course of a few years, and not in a healthy manner. In the last photograph of her and her only child together, she seemed to be staring into some middle space, lost. There were three sharp knocks on the basement door. These knocks were identical in every way to those I had heard two hours before. I did not need

a formal analysis to know that the spiky pattern those knocks would have made on a voxtrack grid back at the university would have matched the earlier ones precisely.

A man of about twenty-five stood outside on the top step. He wore thick, comically bookish glasses, and his eyes were barely visible. He wore a heavy flannel shirt that was two sizes too big, and stained dark blue sweatpants over a pair of ill-fitting corduroys. His sneakers were the sort one would usually see on a young boy. He greeted me and told me his name was Ben, and that he lived next door. His power had gone out and he did not have any candles, so he asked to borrow some. I said yes, and invited him to come inside while I looked for them. At this suggestion, Ben seemed both frightened and fascinated, as if he had never been inside another's house. After a long moment, he came in. As he moved past me, there was absolutely no sense of physical human presence to him. I turned on a single lamp in the basement so he would not be standing in the dark. I was able to find some candles quite quickly, having seen some on the Marclays' dining room table. I retrieved them and hurried back down to the basement, where the visitor stood awkwardly, unmoving, in a corner. I held the candles in my hand and did not offer them just yet, wanting to extract as much information as I could.

Through a series of careful questions, I was able to learn much from Ben. He told me in a very small voice that he had lived next door for one year with his brother, who had gone out tonight to Parsonsburg. When I asked Ben what he did for a living, he seemed baffled by the question, and told me that neither he nor his brother worked, that they had inherited some money from their uncle, who had been a real estate investor. His brother's name was Donovan, and he took care of all the money. When I asked Ben what his last name was, he replied, 'Gantt.' It confirmed what I had already assumed.

As the conversation, or what passed for conversation, lengthened, Ben became visibly more nervous and no longer made eye contact with me. On two separate occasions, he asked me for the time. He was obviously very anxious to get back home. I noticed also that speaking the name of his brother caused him distress. He asked me what I did for a living, and I told him I was a sort of psychologist. Instead of asking a follow-up question, he inquired immediately if I was sleeping when he had knocked on the door. Even though I said no, he then asked me if I had been dreaming. He seemed only partially connected to the room and to our exchange of words, as if most of his mind were completely occupied. Ben then said a most disturbing thing: that Donovan 'made' him relate all his dreams to him. When I asked him why this was, he merely stared off into the distance, and after several seconds refocused, having apparently forgotten what I had asked.

I asked more questions about Donovan, but the answers were vague. Donovan had worked for a time in a nursery but had stopped. The two of them did not leave the house unless they 'had to.' It had been that way, Ben said, for a long time. I was able to eventually glean the reason for his nervousness. His brother had gone out for groceries, and Ben was anxious to know how long such an errand might take. Surely he was risking something by venturing outside of his house and wanted to return as soon as he could so as not to arouse suspicion that he had dared leave. At the end of our talk, Ben blurted out that what he really wanted to borrow was a radio, because he wanted to hear what the newscasters had to say about the snowstorm that was on its way. When I told him I would gladly try to find one for him somewhere in the house, he again asked me how long it would take for Donovan to return from Parsonsburg.

I left him one more time and navigated the stairs up to the main floor with the flashlight. There was a small portable radio in Glory Marclay's room. For some reason I am not sure of, I felt the

need to reach out and touch the head of one of the staring dolls resting on her bed. The plastic was very warm to the touch. I left the room and returned to the basement. I handed the radio to the ghost of Benjamin Gantt. He took it, and his mouth began to quiver, as if he were about to cry. He told me he had to go and walked to the door quickly. I opened it for him, and he moved past me, climbing the steps and disappearing around the side of the house into the freezing dark. I had heard that both Ben and his brother Donovan had died, but I had not been able to find much out about either one of them. I knew that I was meant to follow Ben, that he was involving me in a playlet of sorts. Where it would lead was a mystery to me.

I let ten minutes pass, and then I stepped out into the cold, taking my backpack with me out of sheer reflex. There were flurries falling lightly as a snowstorm moved in from the north. The land was entirely dark. Far away, I could see the dim glow of lights on the side of Route 41. I started to walk in that direction. It was seventy-five yards or so across the Marclay property, which was cut off from the adjacent property by that tall screen of trees. I parted it and came out on the other side, in view of the closest house to the Marclays. This one was in a state of total disrepair, having been abandoned some time ago. I walked unnoticed across the large unkempt lawn, wrapping my scarf tightly around my neck. From what the ghost had told me, I believed it was possible that this house was where Ben and his brother Donovan had lived after their father's death. It had most likely been sold or simply given to them by their Uncle Bernard. Half the windows of the house were boarded up, and the front door was firmly padlocked. It seemed unusual to me that a house on such a desirable stretch of property should stay abandoned. There was no way in unless I wanted to climb in through a low window, which was not boarded and whose glass pane had long since been removed. I decided to try it.

I managed to push myself over the window ledge and fall into the darkened house. I was grateful to be at least out of the wind, if not the cold. I could see almost nothing inside the house. Large portions of the walls were hacked away. There was no furniture left, just debris. Almost right away, I could make out a small object sitting precariously atop a pile of what looked like wood paneling. I walked over to it and lifted it. It was a book, bound in imitation black leather. The interior pages were college-ruled. A price sticker was still attached to the lower right-hand corner of the back cover, and an orange paint stain streaked the spine. It was a diary. Obviously it had been left for me as part of the manufactured drama, and I sat down with my back against one corner of the house, turned on my flashlight, and sat down to read it. I suspected it would tell me where to find Ben next. As I read, I sometimes had to turn my head to breathe so that the cloud of my breath would not obscure my vision.

The diary was written in Ben Gantt's childlike handwriting. It began on April 10 of an undetermined year and covered approximately one month of the young man's life. Benjamin began his first entry by describing how his brother Donovan ordered him to submit to treatment with a Doctor Spahn, because Ben was getting to be more and more of a burden to Donovan. One day Donovan drove Ben into the city after Ben made sure to hide his diary carefully to avoid one of his brother's almost daily inspections of his personal belongings. Benjamin had found this Doctor Spahn, who claimed to be a psychiatrist, to be very strange. His hands were twice as big as Benjamin's, or so he wrote, and Spahn was in his eighties. While Donovan waited in a car down the street, Spahn had asked Ben question after question about his heart condition. The man had gone out of his way to show Ben his medical degrees and textbooks. Ben was obviously frightened of Spahn. Later that night, Ben heard Donovan on the phone laughing and talking to Spahn.

Ben was hypnotized by the doctor for the first time on a Saturday. It was Spahn's intention to use the power of subconscious suggestion to alleviate Ben's general sense of fear of the world. Ben barely remembered what happened after he lapsed into unconsciousness. He found himself walking down the street, but he could barely hear any sounds. He watched people pass him silently, and he became aware that his brother was following his progress with the car from behind him. Ben wrote that the sunlight had been changed somehow into dark shades of purple and black, as if night and day had been reversed. It felt nice to him. The next thing he remembered was waking up on Doctor Spahn's couch. Spahn was very happy. He said that they had already made a tremendous amount of progress. Ben and Donovan ate at a hamburger place on the way back to their house, and Ben wrote that Donovan forced him to eat more than he should have. The next day, Ben sat looking out his bedroom window while he was supposed to be asleep. He had been given some kind of tablets to swallow, but he had concealed them in his palm. Ben saw Doctor Spahn's car pull up to the house, and the old man visited with Donovan.

Ben did not leave his room for two days. Daylight hurt his eyes and his throat. He only felt better when night came. The diary's next entry told of Ben's third visit to Doctor Spahn's office. By this time the daylight stung his hands. This time, while Ben was under hypnosis, Spahn walked with him. It was already dark when they went out onto the street. There was now no sound in Ben's ears, but he liked the feeling of the darkness now that the sun had gone down. People drifted by him, and Doctor Spahn's hand never left his shoulder. Spahn talked profusely, but Ben couldn't hear a word of it. After a time they left the main roads and walked through back streets and alleys. Once they went by a cemetery and Spahn stopped him there, talking very quickly, pointing and gesturing almost angrily. Then the two of them went on. Ben got a little dizzy, and at some point Spahn was actually pulling him along with his large hand over Ben's wrist. Then they were in a place near the bay where the city's garbage was sent out from the harbor on scows. Ben remembered tall buildings with broken windows. Spahn pointed at someone walking around there. To Ben, the person was just a shape made out of blue. Spahn made Ben run after the shape, but it had gotten away from him. He was too slow and clumsy. And so, Ben wrote, Doctor Spahn went after it.

Ben awoke back in his room, with Donovan standing over him. He said that Ben needed more therapy with Spahn. But when they returned to the office the next day, there was no answer at the interior door. Ben opened it to find many of Spahn's books and papers scattered around messily. Ben lifted one of the books to find it was a medical text designed for a high school educational level. In the margins of its pages were scrawled dozens upon dozens of handwritten notes. Ben left the office and returned to the car, where Donovan was waiting. Furious, Donovan went up to the office to find Spahn but was not able to. He drove Ben home, and on the way he told him that he himself would hypnotize Ben from now on. He said he had learned from Spahn how to do it. The diary ended with Ben reporting a series of headaches, which dissipated dramatically at night. Donovan made him a deal: if Ben behaved and caused no further trouble with his fears, they could drive out to a different part of the city and walk around amongst those welcoming, silent purple and black shadows.

I left the diary where I found it and climbed out the window through which I had entered. Standing on the lawn, I looked to the west. Route 41 rose and stretched toward a faraway hill. Under the full moon I could see a human figure standing in the middle of the road, about a hundred yards away. I could not see any details, but when the figure turned and began to walk

over the hill and out of sight, I decided to follow on foot, certain it was Benjamin Gantt. The wind rose and in less than a minute my face was almost numb from the cold as I got closer to the road. Upon my leaving the abandoned property and setting foot on 41, a single car rolled past me. I tried to use its headlights to see farther down the road. There was no sign of the ghost. I knew that Ben's physical actions should closely mimic those of a living human's, at least for a while, and so I reversed direction and jogged for a few hundred yards towards the car I had brought to the Marclay house. I got inside, out of the cold, and started the engine.

I pulled onto 41, and within a minute I was at the place where I thought Ben had stood. Further ahead, the road curved to the right between two farms. I saw no one. I covered another full mile before I pulled over. Almost no cars went past. That was when I spotted Ben, far ahead, standing under a lamppost beside a thick stretch of trees. I pulled back onto the road and drove toward him. He turned and walked into the woods. I drove right past them on a hunch. Another mile later, there Ben was, walking over a dark, hilly field on the other side of the road entirely. I kept going straight. Five minutes passed, then almost ten, and I saw Ben once more. This time I could see nothing more than a silhouette, but the way the tail of his long flannel shirt was ruffled by the wind gave him away, and the fact that no thinking human would be standing in the middle of a cemetery by the side of the road in such brutal temperatures.

I had never seen this sort of behavior from a ghost, appearing and disappearing without regard to the laws of motion and geography. I did not know what it meant. I pulled over and for a few minutes I did nothing but watch Ben as he stood between the rows of silhouetted tombstones. He seemed to be looking down at one of them in particular. I reached to shut the heating fan on the dashboard off, and when I looked up again, he was gone. I got out of the car and walked into the cemetery. I knew I would only be able to stay there for a few minutes; the cold was just unbearable even though the flurries had stopped. I walked to the approximate place where he had been standing. I could make out his name on the headstone in front of me. His brother's grave was beside his. The dates of their deaths matched. The thought of a murder-suicide instantly entered my mind. I returned to the car and drove on down the road, planning to return to Theodore Gantt's house. It was now well past 1 a.m.

I drove a longer distance than I wanted to, looking for a place to turn around, but there was only empty land ahead, and I would have to turn around in the middle of the road. Then I saw a road branching off to the right, and I took it, hoping to circle around. But this road twisted and turned again and again, and I was about to give up on it when yet another road turned again to the right, all but assuring me of a simple way back to where I had come from. But I had no such luck. After a full mile of driving on this road, it didn't seem to be going in the ideal direction anymore, and at one point when I took a fork to the left, I believed I was on a different route entirely. I saw the lights of a small service station up ahead, the only business I had seen in the area. I pulled onto the tarmac and parked beside one of the two gas pumps. There was another car there, at the adjacent one, a white idling pickup truck. I walked to the cashier's office, which was abutted by a small garage, and went inside.

Behind the counter was a rotund man in his fifties, slumped in a chair. He was swaddled in a massive blue coat. A name tag underneath it suggested he owned the place. I greeted him, but he did not immediately respond. He was staring intently through the window blinds that looked out on the tarmac. I asked him for directions back to Route 41, and for a moment he said absolutely nothing, did not even turn his head. I repeated my question, and he said only, 'He's

been out there fifteen minutes.' When I asked him what he was talking about, he said that the white pickup truck outside had pulled in fifteen minutes before, and no one had gotten out. I asked the man why he didn't go out to the full-service pump and tend to him. He replied that he couldn't go out there, and now, neither could I.

Frustrated by his opacity, I asked him what he was talking about, and the proprietor of the station told me in a low, strangled voice, as if he were afraid of creating the smallest sound. Never once did he look at me. He riveted his stare through the blinds. He believed the man outside sitting in the pickup truck, whom I had not looked at even for a moment, was the same man who had been spoken about on the radio that night. The news had made mention of a wanted serial killer, nicknamed Father Bones, who had been spotted in the area just a few hours earlier by a convenience store clerk. His description had been posted all over town. Even I had heard of him. I looked outside through the glass door.

The pickup truck kept idling, spewing out exhaust. It was impossible to see into the cab of the truck. The truck was old, beaten. I told the proprietor that he was being absurd. I based this mostly on his frustratingly childish and terrified demeanor rather than what I truly knew of the facts. But he said the description of the truck was the same. He said he had been able to see the man once as he sat in the truck, just once, when he shifted and the light struck him just so. And the man would not turn the engine off, would not get out. Through the glass door I noticed more details. The truck had a broken left taillight, an American flag sticker on the passenger's side door, and a large muddy splotch on the frontmost visible tire. I could hear the engine rumbling low.

I asked the man behind the counter why he didn't just call the police. He said he didn't want to move. He told me this in such a weak voice that I barely heard the last two words. He said there was a shotgun in the adjacent room, and a phone. But he believed the man out there was watching us very carefully. I said I would call the police for him, and I turned toward the adjacent room. The man told me to stop, but I went anyway, stepping into a very small area beyond which the garage could be entered. It had no lights. There was a phone sitting on a messy desk in the corner, a desk topped with stacks of invoices and boxes of replacement fuses. I picked up the phone and dialed the operator, requesting the police. When she asked me if it was an emergency, I started to say no, but changed my answer to yes. I turned to look into the front counter area, but could not see the owner from my angle. The line clicked, and I waited for someone to answer me. I had a better view of the pickup truck from where I was. The blinds on the window were so old that several of the slats had fallen off over time. I saw that the truck's wipers rested diagonally across its windshield. Still nothing could be seen inside the cab, which was maddeningly dark.

A policeman came on the line. I told him I was at an ARCO station on Vegasville Road in Belconsin. I was not absolutely sure I was giving him the fully correct information, but I had become very nervous. I told him that the proprietor of the station thought he had recognized a vehicle mentioned on the radio and that it was sitting there right now. That was as far as I got when the low rumble of the pickup truck's engine cut out entirely. A shiver went up my spine, and I stopped speaking. The new silence was horribly noticeable. The policeman on the phone asked me one question, and I responded very quietly in the affirmative. I asked him to simply please come, and I lowered the phone. Then I moved delicately back into the other room.

The proprietor was gone. The front door, however, had not been opened. I would have heard the tinkling of the Christmas bells affixed over it. They had greeted me when I came in. He had

vanished through some other exit. I very specifically did not look through the front window. Instead I retreated to the inner office again, nine or ten steps that took me out of the sightline of both the cashier's counter and the outside world. I heard a thin reed of sound squeak through the phone. The voice there was trying to tell me that the police would be at the station in a few minutes. I crouched and felt under the desk for the shotgun I had been told was there. There was nothing at all. The only sounds from outside the building then were the wind and the noise of exactly one vehicle passing by on the road.

I emerged one last time into the outer room and saw that there was a partially closed exit door beside a soda machine. It led down two steps into the rear of the garage, which was utterly dark. I pushed on the cheap wooden door, and the garage came fully into view. I could make out only vague forms. A very large sedan lay inside the garage, its hood open. I stepped cautiously around it. I could see my breath floating in front of me. I lifted my right foot over a toolbox a split second before I would have kicked it and sent it skittering across the cement floor. There was one last door on the far side of the garage. It had no knob. I guided it open gently.

The wind struck me hard. Beyond was a thick mass of featureless woods. I edged along the side of the building over the space of a full minute, moving a total of about twelve feet, hating myself for my caution but unable to deny my disquiet. Then I put my head around the corner of the garage to get a full view of the tarmac. The pickup truck was still sitting there. Ten feet away from it, my own car waited beside the self-service pump. Without pausing to think, I began to walk forward, needing to cover about forty feet to get inside my car. I fixed my stare on the white pickup and listened for footsteps. I quickened my pace, and it became an awkward trot. I could not remember if I had locked the car, and I had a very vivid mental image of myself setting my keys down on the counter inside the station and forgetting them there while I went to call the police. But it wasn't true. My keys were in my right front pocket. I had never locked the car anyway. I got in, closed the door fast, locked it, and started the engine. There was no movement from the pickup truck. I pressed heavily on the accelerator and turned back onto Vegasville Road without even bothering to look for traffic. I kept the car at a rational thirty miles per hour as I left, looking constantly in the rearview mirror. I nearly ran off once into a ditch. The lights of the station fell behind me.

I fully intended to drive all the way back to the Marclay house to resume my vigil for Theodore Gantt. But as Vegasville Road wound on and on, making me almost lose my sense of direction yet again, I decided not to return just yet. I still saw only one house every half-mile or so, set well off the road. The area was a series of empty hills and valleys. I pulled off about fifteen minutes away from the station onto a long, winding driveway that led up to a dark farmhouse. I stopped just a few yards up the driveway, turned off the car, and sat, listening to the wind. I found myself unable to do anything but sit and wait. I knew I would have to return to the gas station at some point. I knew it. So I would sit and let some time go by. The first car that passed by me on the road startled me quite badly. Its color was white. But it was not a pickup truck.

It was a two-mile journey. The only evidence of humanity I encountered on the way was the high beams of two passing cars. When I saw the lights of the ARCO station approaching, I was both discouraged and frightened. There didn't seem to be anyone there at all. As I got closer, I saw that even the white pickup truck was gone. With an unpleasant feeling in my stomach I crept onto the tarmac, cutting my headlights off. Something seemed very wrong. The police should have still been there. I stopped my car exactly where I had before. I told myself it was silly to feel frightened. I would go into the cashier's office and see if the proprietor was still there, and perhaps buy some coffee and a candy bar. Then I would find out exactly what had

happened. But the lights were out in the service building. I assumed then that the proprietor had gone home for the night, and I felt a sense of real relief. If he had come back to shut the lights off and gone home so quickly after speaking to the police, obviously there had never been any cause for alarm. It had probably been a misunderstanding, a case of mistaken identity.

I stepped out onto the tarmac and closed the driver's side door. The wind gusted and slapped the empty husk of a bag of pretzels against my leg. I walked toward the building. The front door was ajar. I stopped and looked at the knob for some time. I was roused from my reverie only by the sound of a car going past, a mustang doing about sixty miles per hour. I moved into the service building, listening for any movement. The heat had apparently been turned off as well. I couldn't see more than eight or ten feet in front of me. There were no signs of anything being amiss. The counter behind which the proprietor had sat was empty save for a stained memo calendar. I went into the adjacent room.

Inside, there was one noticeable difference. I found myself unable to focus on anything else for what seemed like minutes. The cord to the telephone stretched from the base on the desk all the way up to the ceiling, a dangling black vertical rope. The receiver was hanging from a cardboard advertising mobile above. The receiver rotated gently, touched and guided by a thread of breeze that curled into the building from outside. I reached a hand out to touch the receiver. It was very cold. Then, from behind me, back in the cashier's area, there came a creaking sound. I turned. The sound might have come from as far away as the tarmac outside, or as close as the front door of the service building. It had been a footstep, or something brushing against a window. Through the window blinds, I could see a panel truck rolling past the station on Vegasville Road. The sound of it partially camouflaged a creak that was almost twice as prominent as the first one.

I left the interior room, took a left turn at the counter, and pushed my way out of the building entirely. I felt an instant sense of relief when the wind struck me. I would simply get inside my car and never return. I took one, two, three steps toward my car, and I heard the creaking again, this time very, very close. My heart thudded inside my chest. I stopped after three more steps and looked at my car. The rear door closest to me was open, just an inch, the barest inch. I narrowed in on that visible crack. I hurtled back through my memory to imagine a circumstance in which I may not have fully closed that door. The arc lights above shone down and made the windows of the car only darker, more impenetrable. As I watched, there was then an infinitesimal movement of the rear door. Gently, so as not to make any sound, it was shut from inside by a hand I could not see. There was a small metallic clink as the metal components merged.

I turned to run. I ran across the tarmac as fast as I could toward Vegasville Road. I did not look back. My feet pounded on the cement. In seconds I was on the road and I kept going, running down the double yellow line into the darkness. I could not even pray for a car to come; my mind was a fog, and all I could hear was my own frantic breathing and my shoes hitting the pavement harder and harder. In seconds the cold air was ripping at the insides of my lungs, and I knew I would soon have to collapse. But I did not. The fear kept me moving beyond my physical limits. When the lights of the gas station fell behind me entirely, I was in almost total darkness. It was then that I was most terrified. I kept running. A spike of pain hit me in the chest, and my breath began to come in shorter and shorter spurts. No cars came. The wind stung my eyes, and my mouth was completely dry. Not even looking where I was running, I almost veered off the road entirely, into the woods. I looked down, trying to locate the yellow line, and was unable. I kept running blind. I eventually slowed to almost a jog, utterly unable to go on, when headlights

washed over me from behind. I turned and instantly knew my own car had come for me, driven by a madman, a killer. But it was a station wagon, beeping its horn at me. To avoid being crushed, I stumbled onto the shoulder as I turned and waved my hands frantically. The station wagon stopped fifty feet beyond me. I ran to it, and suddenly my legs went out from under me. I collapsed and my head hit the pavement, causing consciousness to leave me entirely.

I was cursed with a terrible dream that I think I sunk into immediately after hitting the pavement. In it, I had been shot in my right leg with a thick wooden arrow, as if the little archer that Glory Marclay had drawn back at her house had shot me. The arrow had buried itself just below my knee, and blood pulsated from the wound. Even so, I was chasing someone through the woods, a woman who would not listen to me when I called out to her to stop and help me; she merely ran forward. I was asking her where I was, and what the senseless string of letters that had been mysteriously etched onto my palm in Glory's room meant, and where the nearest hospital was, but she didn't answer. So I chased her. Wounded as I was, I was faster than she. I caught up to her in an empty parking lot, crashing through a blizzard that unleashed itself overhead, and then I saw her face as she turned around to scream. It was the face of Glory Marclay's mother, but instead of apologizing for the mistake, I somehow reached down and ripped the arrow from my leg and I thrust it into her chest, again and again, until she fell into the newly fallen snow. As she went down one of her hands grabbed mine, and the mere act of her desperate touch stripped away the letters on my palm, leaving only an *h* and an *m* just barely visible through the knotted tangle of her blood-soaked hair.

When I awoke, I was inside the station wagon that had almost run me down. For a moment I had no idea why. Then it came flooding back to me quickly. But the car was parked on the side of the road, a different road than where it had stopped for me. There was no one beside me in the driver's seat. I was alone. The dome light was on. I looked to my right, groggy, unable to focus for a moment. Outside the passenger's side window, I saw a dense patch of woods off the shoulder. Looking forward, through the windshield, I saw an unfamiliar country road, but immediately recognized a bullet-riddled speed limit sign that I had passed on my way down Route 41. I was less than a half-mile from Theodore Gantt's old house, and the house that had belonged to his two now-dead children. The interior of the station wagon was clean, almost spotless. I could tell nothing from it about who had driven me here, or why they had done it. The clock on the dashboard read 3:24. I got out of the car, light-headed and still very afraid. I looked around in the dark and stepped around the car, peering into the woods. But there was no one there. I stood for three or four minutes, shivering, waiting. I had truly been abandoned, but by whom I did not know. I would not wait for whomever it was to come back.

I began to walk in the direction of the Marclay house. I had to cross the road to do it. On my way, I looked to my left and saw something that looked like an envelope stuck underneath the station wagon's windshield wipers. I lifted the wipers and found not an envelope, but a single piece of notebook paper. I unfolded it and walked across the road to where a streetlight gave me sufficient illumination to read what was written there. It was only one line, written in the unmistakable clumsy scrawl that I recognized from reading Benjamin Gantt's sad diary. The note said only this: *Donovan is waiting for you now.*

I reached the Marclay house in fifteen minutes. I was so exhausted that I spent another quarter of an hour simply huddled in a corner of the dark basement, shivering, trying to get warm. My backpack was gone, left in the back seat of my car back at the gas station. I felt sick, a sickness

deep in my bones. When I began to compose myself again, I walked through the house, trying to sense if it had become different somehow. With my mind in the state it was in, it was difficult to tell. But there were physical manifestations that told me things had changed.

The stairs leading up from the basement were no longer clear. Instead, the entire collection of Dr. Seuss books that I had first seen in the upstairs den at ten o'clock, forty or fifty of them, now blocked my way. Each book had been placed there open and standing, fanning out, the spines facing me. I read the titles as I stepped delicately over them, moving upwards. I knocked one over at the top of the stairs, and I replaced it carefully. All the dolls that had been in Glory Marclay's bedroom at the beginning of the evening had been arranged in a duplicate pattern downstairs in the living room, except now almost every single tiny face had been positioned to stare forward at me as I stood at the room's entrance. They rested on the sofa, on the easy chair, on the ottoman, in front of the fireplace screen. The ones with the big eyes now lay on the floor at my feet, face up, seeing nothing more than the ceiling. Glory's drawing of the little archer girl was no longer fastened to the refrigerator with a magnet. Instead it lay inexplicably beside Ben Gantt's diary on the coffee table in the living room. The diary should not have been there. I lifted Glory's picture, traced my index finger over her signature, counted the sharp arrows in the smiling girl's sling. Then I set the picture down and moved across the room.

I needed badly to splash cold water on my face and swallow some of it down. My lungs were still burning. I felt shaky on my feet, groggy and emptied out, as if I were only a shell with no internal organs. My blood pulsed thickly in my temple. A low hum reverberated inside my head from back to front to back again. The best thing for me to have done was to leave the house immediately. In a weakened state I was at risk. But there were only a couple of hours left before sunrise. I made my way into the bathroom on the main floor of the house and switched the light on. The overhead fluorescents made me wince. I scrubbed my face with the coldest water I could summon, then looked into the mirror to find that a vessel in my left eye had broken, and the cornea that stared back at me was almost entirely red. There was also a thin gash running from my left ear all the way to the fleshiest part of my cheek, a result of my fall to the pavement. I could not look at myself for very long. The overhead light went out with an echoing click, and a second later the rest of the house went completely dark as well. I put a hand out to silence the faucet. Then, seeing a shadow of something besides my own face in the mirror, I turned slowly to look behind me.

A small child's flower print dress clung to the rear wall of the bathroom. My night vision made it out perfectly, even down to the gentle curve of the tiny roses that were scattered in neat linear patterns down the front. I recognized the dress from one of the many photographs of Glory Marclay spread throughout the house. As I watched, a thin trickle of murky blood peeked out from behind the ruffled collar, then slid downwards over the top three buttons, then down even farther, becoming a much thicker stream that quickly reached the end of the fabric and dripped down onto the toilet tank, striking it with dime-sized droplets. I turned away from that sight only when a maddening itch struck my left palm. There was something written on it again, in the same spiky charcoal letters as before, and I saw it was the fulfillment of the original string I'd begun upstairs, where Glory Marclay had drawn horses and mountains and archers before she was stolen in the night. The new letters, wedged between and around the first, had been etched so firmly and deeply that my skin had nearly broken. I brought the palm closer to my face and made out the message, misinterpreting it once before it became completely clear. It said this:

Her mommy killed her

I turned the faucet on again and scrubbed my left palm with all the soap in the dish beside the sink, going at it so hard that it began to bleed. One minute later, the bathroom light came back on by itself.

I left the bathroom and moved into the living room. Someone was waiting for me there. A man stood beside the coffee table, facing away from me. His hands were laced behind his back. He wore a clean white shirt and tan khaki pants. He turned when I stopped. Though the man was very young, his gaze was piercing, even in the dark. He greeted me in a low voice, and introduced himself as Donovan. He did not smile. His face never changed from one moment to the next. The ghost told me he was looking for his brother, for Benjamin. I told him that yes, Ben had been here, but only for a short while. Donovan asked if he had seemed frightened, and I said yes. He told me not to pay any attention to him, that Ben was very troubled, and that to protect him they stayed in the house most of the time. When I asked what was wrong with Ben, Donovan informed me that he had killed their uncle.

It was an accident, Donovan said. They had been sent to live with him after their father died. Bernard had been standing on a ladder one day, fixing the roof. Ben and Donovan had been playing, running around. Ben ran into the ladder, and Bernard grabbed a power line to break his fall. It sent a lethal charge through his body. He was essentially dead for three weeks before they took him off life support. Ben was seven. He grew up thinking that he killed Bernard, that he was responsible. His mentality was still a child's, Donovan said. He could not take care of himself. In that moment I gleaned that in life, Donovan had made sure that Ben was never truly disavowed of the notion that he had caused their uncle's death. I could tell by Donovan's demeanor. I was standing in the presence of evil. There was no mistaking it. He was holding something low at his waist. It was a doll, a pioneer girl, and it had belonged to Glory Marclay. The dolls were still sitting everywhere, having been strangely relocated. Donovan bent gently, almost arthritically, at the waist, and set the doll down on the coffee table. Now he saw the other object on the coffee table, and reached for it in a motion that seemed planned, rehearsed.

He asked me what the object was. I told him that Ben had been keeping a diary, and that he had left it here, but also that it revealed very little. Donovan wanted to know if it made accusations. More specifically, against him personally. He flipped through the pages idly. I could no longer stand to be so far away. I had to see more detail of Donovan's face. I stepped toward the center of the room, and then I lied, telling him no, there were no accusations. Donovan closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, as if warding off a headache. He was confused, vexed, as to why Ben had left the house. It didn't make sense to him. He wanted me to give him an answer. But I would not do it.

When Donovan spoke next, he craned his neck to an unnatural degree, not moving his shoulders even an inch, like a mannequin. He began to speak, softly and slowly, about his uncle. After Theodore Gantt died, Donovan said, Uncle Bernard had come into possession of many of the man's things, things that had been sealed away inside the basement that lay below our feet at that very moment. Bernard had been planning to use these things as evidence against Theodore in a court of law. I did not respond when Donovan asked me if I accepted this truth, so he went on. Bernard had found all of Theodore's old books, all his journals. Donovan told me that he himself knew they were being kept, and he had read every word. Bernard always watched him. He didn't think Donovan should be around Ben. Donovan said he felt the old fool would have eventually killed him as he slept, all because he refused to condemn his father. Donovan asked me how he could have possibly condemned him when the man spoke so many truths.

It appeared through an optical illusion that Donovan had gotten closer to me. Before, he had been standing directly in front of the coffee table. Now he was almost five feet away from it. Donovan told me that Ben was delusional, that he had to be watched very carefully. Nothing he said could be believed. He saw things and heard things that were not real, and sometimes he was so convinced of these things that people around him became convinced of them as well. But Donovan assured me none of it was real. Then, again, he asked me to tell him what the diary said. I reverted to a protective lie. I said I didn't remember. It was not possible for Donovan to physically hurt me—no spirit physically could—but I was deeply frightened of him all the same.

Instead of paging through the diary to challenge my lie, he closed his eyes once more and lapsed into a quiet monologue, seeming to forget I was even in the room. All of us, all of us in the outside world, made him ill. He could not be expected to go on like this, with all this interference. It had begun with Bernard, who had first started claiming that it was really Donovan who killed him while he lay comatose in the hospital. He would wait until everyone was out of the room, and then accuse Donovan, telling him he'd be found out one day. And now, once in a while, there was someone like me, a stranger, who tried to get inside Ben's head, and there were more accusations. They even wanted to know about his father from time to time—and the girls they kept finding mutilated in a nearby riverbed. Tonight he had only gone to Parsonsburg, and only for an hour, yet I had felt the need to open the door to Ben, and cause so much difficulty.

A grandfather clock chimed somewhere. But there was no such clock anywhere in the house. I felt feverish and weak. My heart was thudding as it had back at the gas station. Donovan's ghost exhaled in a sickly rattle. As I watched, a deep cut on his chin produced two quick drops of blood. They fell to the floor and splashed silently on the carpet. He did feel better now than he had in some time, though, he told me in the dark. Maybe he could still live here, in the house. Without Ben, it was going to be much easier. After he said this, he became as inert as the paint on the wall behind his head, static and void. When I found the words to tell Donovan that I knew they were both dead, and had been dead for years, he responded as a plate responds to a fork set beside it, with the changing of not a single molecule of his nonbeing. But after a while, he did begin to speak again, and he spoke longer than ever before.

He spoke of his father's brilliance, a brilliance accumulated through those long-ago studies in the continent of Africa, and the resurrection rites he discovered and had to fight for. It had all culminated in the sort of hand-to-hand combat his army unit might have been trained in, but for Theodore Gantt the goal had not been to take territory or defend his comrades. He had snuck into a small village under cover of darkness and butchered the sixteen people who protected those valid rites whose worth was beyond imagination. Donovan's father had boiled the heads of the men and women and children he had decapitated. Donovan told me of the years it had taken to copy those rites by hand into books that would not fall apart and become dust, and of the cleverness it took to secret the books away inside this very house. The police had discovered them, of course, but Theodore Gantt had written in a code known only to himself, and in the end the police had put the books right back where they had been found. Donovan considered that honorable.

He went on and on, telling me that the key that would open the tiny closet beside the basement furnace had been inside the house somewhere since 1973. He wasn't quite sure of the exact spot, but it was time to examine those rites, to go over them carefully, because he didn't want to be like he was anymore, a ghost without hands or body to do the work he had been born to do. He was thankful that I had appeared there tonight, thankful for the special channeling

abilities that I held inside me. He could enter me in a whisper. When he said this, a hot marble ball uncoiled in my stomach like a heart attack sprung from below, and I saw that there was a danger for me in that room that I had not dared to imagine. Donovan told me that tonight was my last night on earth as a seeker of ghosts, as anything at all. He was coming into me now.

The marble ball inside me leapt up, expanded, and exploded like the birth of a universe. It sucked me down into a place that had no definition. I stumbled backwards as a hideous, ripping pain engulfed me. I crashed into the front foyer and towards the front door of the house. I broke my right arm with the force of my impact against the knob. The door burst open and I was outside, running but having no way to fight off the sensation of Donovan's cruelty and hate flowing into every cell in my body. I collapsed on the front lawn, shrieking. It was snowing. Every descending flake felt like a firebrand. Then the pain reached its plateau, something I believe no human being can ever understand. It was the pain of my soul being eaten. My body broiled with disease and rot and ghosts and the putrifacted spirit of Donovan Gantt. I begged God to release me, to let me die. He did not answer me.

When my colleague Savid Doud did not receive a phone call from me at 6 a.m., he realized something had gone wrong, and he drove right away to the Marclay house from Baltimore. It took him three hours. Upon entering, the myriad damages to the house, like the broken door, two upended lamps, and a deep tear in the living room carpet, told him the worst had happened. When he saw me standing at the back of the room, silhouetted by the dawn light sifting in through the wide picture windows, he was at first relieved. But when he moved closer and truly saw my face, he began to scream, and he did not stop until I tore his throat out. Then Donovan began the process of making my body search for that key that would deliver the books he had been promised by his brilliant father, books that had been unfairly denied him by monstrous humans who never understood him.

Donovan Gantt is no longer a ghost. It took him less than seven weeks to accomplish full human form through his experiments with the information those books contained in a language few outside the forests of Africa could possibly understand. During those seven weeks, I felt myself killing a half dozen innocent human beings and dumping their bodies in the woods despite the disadvantage of having a badly broken arm. I lived like an animal, completely at the mercy of the parasite's will. No one ever saw the things I did. I was cursed to watch every moment that my hands committed Donovan's atrocities, and was witness to his final act of witchcraft, the one that set him utterly free and left my broken body in the cemetery in which his own had been buried years before. The long possession left me partially blind and mortally afraid of the dark. I lost almost forty pounds of body weight, and my left ring finger was almost severed in a death struggle with one of my victims. Ironically, Donovan was so sickly brilliant that I need have no worries about the crimes I involuntarily committed ever being discovered.

I am alone and safe, and my one purpose in life now is to somehow recover enough of my health to find Donovan and end his awful existence before an untold number of others have to die. But every time the sun goes down and night falls, I find my focus wandering, and instead of collecting more and more information to find Donovan, I find myself just walking the streets of the city, feeling protected by the purple shadows that conceal me. I feel some peace then, and the tortured thoughts of what I've done cannot seem to find me. It is all I can do sometimes to stop myself from actively following the shapes of people I see passing by me. I must come up with some way to keep myself from going out into the dark. I have contacted two colleagues, told them what happened to Doud, and begged them to come help me through this madness. They are due to arrive tonight at the decrepit hotel I find myself living in. I pray they find Aramis

Churchton, a trusted psychic researcher, and not a ghoul beyond hope, one who cannot stop himself from pursuing the strange and wondrous music I sometimes hear calling me into the shadows of night. It is the music of death and insanity, and sometimes it sounds so beautiful that I would surely slaughter anyone who dared come between me and its mysterious promise.

mother

My name is Timothy Reickart. *You see things other people don't*, my mother used to say to me, and those were the words I used as inspiration all my life as I strove to become a film director. But after getting hammered by critics after my first feature and ruining my second with my own ego, I bottomed out in Hollywood thirty years ago directing episodes for a niche syndicated series no one had any respect for, and within five years of feeling on top of the world I felt like I was at the bottom again, saddled with debt, a drinking habit, and a fondness for a new narcotic the showbiz types called Tangerine.

In the spring of 1988, my economic circumstances pretty much decided that my mother had to move into a senior care facility instead of living on her own with a nurse. She moved into a place called Waverly Mews up near Berkeley that July. It happened with the worst possible timing. The shooting of the last three episodes of the series had to be done almost simultaneously because of a technicians' strike, and that meant I was working eighteen-hour days when Mom went in, nervous, alone, and uncertain about her future. I apologized again and again to her primary care doctor for not being able to get away. More union problems stretched things out, and I missed her second week at Waverly Mews too. Her neighbor and longtime friend, whom we'd always called Miss Jeannie, laid into me pretty hard over the phone. The worse news was that Mom's signs of dementia had, according to her, seemed to worsen overnight when she moved in, most likely because of the stress.

I absolutely could not break away from the damn series for a flight north. Day after day we kept pressing to finish shooting, and every day something delayed us.

Miss Jeannie called me on my mother's fourteenth day in the home and I got a report about her new symptoms. Mostly it was predictable little things. For example, the home brought in a dog on Fridays, a golden retriever, just for a few hours of companionship in the day room, but my mother kept referring to it as an ostrich instead. *I saw the ostrich again today*, she told me herself on the phone, and the first time I heard that was so sad. More troubling, she had developed a very odd fear, related to Miss Jeannie by a very nice elderly couple who lived there, a Scottish couple named Betty and Brian. During meals my mother would sometimes point to the quarter-inch crack running down the center of the table where it folded, and she said several times that she was frightened of falling into it. It even haunted her sleep. She always sat as far away from it as she could, and once she had missed breakfast for fear the crack would swallow her up.

I was a wreck when I finally broke free to go visit her on July 7, 1988. I scrapped with a producer about leaving for three days and decided to just run for it and let the chips fall. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't focus anymore. The woman who had sacrificed so much to raise me without a father wasn't understanding why I couldn't come see her, and that had to end.

I was drunk on the plane, a high augmented by painkillers taken for a back injury I'd sustained demonstrating a fall to an actor and had told no one about. From the airport I drove an hour and a half to Berkeley. I'd arranged with the home to sleep there on a cot in my mother's room since I'd be getting there after midnight. I remember that night was as hot as I'd ever felt in northern California, and windy.

A half hour out, my hands began to shake. It was just everything coming down on me at once. I allowed myself a hit of Tangerine, just one pill dug out from my glove compartment. By the time I got to Waverly Mews it would kick in and make me feel lighter, taller somehow, wider somehow, and generally less like me. Soothing and surreal.

Waverly Mews was tucked away on the edge of a wooded neighborhood and I found it easily enough, parked my car in the gravel lot and looked around. It looked just like it did in the photos I'd checked out and sent to my mom before she agreed to move there. It was Miss Jeannie who'd done most of the actual legwork. There was a little pond nearby and access to a walking trail, trees bordering all sides of the building, just one story, shaped like an L. Just two other cars in the lot at this hour.

I walked up to the unmarked front entrance and pressed the buzzer. I was sweating and my feet were tingling, the first signs the Tangerine was getting busy. Another dose of shame hit me, knowing I'd be hugging my mother while on that crap, but it kept me on a relatively even keel.

The third time I hit the buzzer and again got no response, I went up to the glass double doors and peered in through them closely, thoroughly irritated. The night nurse was aware I was coming, there was no question; I'd talked to her on the phone. A lamp sat on what I guessed was the welcome desk, casting a little light around. I could see a sliver of the dining room past the simple foyer, but everything was shadowy elsewhere, no real sign of life. I gave a few firm raps on the glass and paced outside the entrance.

I became quickly convinced that they had forgotten about me. But to me that didn't excuse having no one at the desk. There had to be a night nurse, probably two with a resident population of twenty-five or so. I backed up a few steps to look around for another way in. I decided to walk along the south sidewalk a ways. There were lots of tall windows on that section of the L-shape, but I'd have to trample some flowers. I wasn't in the mood to be delicate.

The first window I approached gave me a view into a big room that seemed set up for physical therapy. I saw mats and bars and a treadmill. But they had squeezed a couple of game tables in there too, checkerboards painted on their surface. And in the corner closest to me was a patch of differently colored carpet with a few children's toys spread out, and a huge dollhouse. A play area, I guess, for the very occasional child who came to visit with their mom and dad. It all sat in semi-darkness, maybe two panels of overhead fluorescents still lit.

That huge dollhouse was the first thing that was ... wrong. It wasn't a normal one, it was a general replica of Waverly News itself, about six feet long. They even had the colors right. Everything had been condensed and there was no glass where all the windows would be; those gaps were open so kids could poke their fingers through. But what child would find that fun? Especially since, when I stepped all the way up to the glass to get a better look, crushing the flowers beneath my shoes, I could see that one of the residents' wings was detailed to the point where there were beds in the rooms, the tiny little beds of the elderly of Waverly Mews. And in each bed, I saw when I squinted hard enough, a small doll. All identical. Little plastic dolls bought in bulk. Each one was face down on its bed, ten of them in all. But no, I saw, not quite identical: There were men and women. They had no clothes on their cheap factory-made bodies. They'd all been entirely stripped.

I rapped on the glass, in vain. I seem to remember myself crying, mentally exhausted. *Please, I thought, I want to see my mom. Why are you doing this to me?*

The next window down was totally dark so I went one more, my shoes now streaked with dirt and new mulch. I looked in on an utterly empty room with an uncarpeted white tile floor and a very big drain in the center, it must have been five feet across. It was like a shower room of sorts, but there were no nozzles in the ceiling or pipes or anything. Just that enormous drain, the wrought iron kind you see on a city street.

As I watched, water emerged from it, rising gently from beneath the floor. The water began to spread out on the tile, covering a wider and wider area. Soon there was a pool of water an inch deep covering an area of about eight feet on all sides, and I thought some pipe had broken, but then ... it all seemed to retract, be drawn back toward the drain, as if there were a slope there, which there certainly was not. The water rolled from all sides back into the drain, and slowly disappeared beneath it, leaving no visible trace of itself, no stain. The room was just as it had been when I'd first peered through the dark window.

Returning to the front entrance, I dropped my decorum and pounded hard and loud on the glass with my open palm, pressing the buzzer again and again. There was no pay phone in sight, I was probably miles away from the nearest one. The communities around me were quiet and woodsy, no place nearby to shop or congregate. I felt like the only person alive. Where were the people those two cars belonged to? A rational me would have tried to drive and find a pay phone regardless, but I was not quite that person because of the stress, because of the pills. I was going to get inside one way or the other. I yelled out to anyone who might be in there, not caring if I woke up the sleeping.

My answer was nothing more than the wind blowing my hair into my face and making the trees rustle and sway. No real moon that night, everything was quite dark.

Everyone in there is dead, I thought suddenly, with no reasoning behind it. And then these nonsensical words came to me: *They will go into the other world on foot*. I found myself repeating them twice in my mind, trying to sort out what I was trying to tell myself through the haze of inebriation. But the words disappeared quickly, to be recalled only years later.

I went looking for a side entrance. I found one at the far west end of the place, having no particular hope it would be unlocked. It was unmarked, unlit, one solid door. Tilting my head up I saw the reason for the unusual darkness: The two spots where bulbs should have been had nothing fastened there, just empty sockets. I would find out much later just why that was, and

it's one of the images that most often comes to me in my nightmares now, those bare sockets where bulbs had actually been very recently. If I had looked into the bushes around me hard enough, I would have seen them in there, intentionally cast away.

But in that moment, I merely pulled on the handle ... and the door opened. I emitted a strange, short bark of dismay and relief. I entered Waverly Mews, wiping my eyes. Life was worth living again, even if only for the next few minutes when I could see my mother in her lonely little room.

One time when we were six we'd gone to the zoo only to find it had closed early for some reason, but she got us in, I'll never forget, she did not quit until she got us in there, seeing so many animals for the first time in my life. Eve Louisa Reickart was her name.

I was in a long featureless hallway lit only by small emergency lights embedded in the ceiling. Turning left at the end of it, the hall got much wider. I had entered the main community area, lights out all around. I walked past the welcome desk and two pitchers of cold citrus water which looked fresh. I poured myself some into a Dixie cup, my mouth was so dry. I looked into the dining room: eight round tables, four chairs at each, a fish tank glowing blue set up beside a small fridge.

I called out *Hello?* Turning to the right and walking past a stretch of wall featuring some canvases which the residents had apparently judged for a local middle school, I found myself virtually in total darkness in another long hallway, the rooms of the residents on either side, each one numbered tastefully with a different photo of a flower below it, a human touch. A decent place, as much as I could afford. I didn't know if my mother was here or in the other wing.

Why was that hallway dark, though? Why was the whole place so dark? I took a few steps forward. There was an open door to my left and a last name in cursive script below a photo of a rose. ALVAREZ. I vaguely recalled that name from one of Miss Jeannie's stories. Mrs. Alvarez was not inside her room for some reason, though the covers were pulled back, the sheets rumpled. Beside the bed on a rollable tray was a box of Kleenex and a magazine, *Southern Living*.

The TV over her bed was on but with no sound. What was showing was very odd. Through an unstable signal and a fair amount of static, words were simply scrolling against a black background. I recognized those words soon enough. It was that famous poem written by some anonymous lost soul, describing the sight of God's footsteps in the sand beside him as he walked on the beach, that poem you see on wall hangings and posters. The words were printed in giant type, in a very severe font, all angry capital letters, as if they were more a brute commandment than a folksy message of hope. When the poem ended the scroll repeated, and here it was again, rolling silently up the screen, too fast to even read unless you were quick. And again, and again, an endless loop through static.

That is not real, I thought to myself. Don't trust it. Trust only what you can touch.

I left that room and kept moving. None of the other doors were open and none of the last names were mine. I turned the corner and was in a short connecting hallway twice as wide, with big picture windows, and a pleasant cutout where a large TV was mounted to the wall. Six easy chairs were arranged so the residents could sit together and watch.

Someone was sitting in one of them. But a blanket had been draped over them, all the way up to the top of their head. I whispered *Hello?* as I moved closer. I touched the person's shoulder through the blanket, causing it to drop just an inch, revealing their forehead. I pulled the blanket away slowly.

It was not a resident of Waverly Mews. It was a bald man of about forty, dressed in nurse's clothing. His eyes were open but he saw nothing. There was a messy splotch of blood on the center of his chest, where his garment was severely torn. So much blood.

I screamed for the first time since I was a child, really screamed into the silence. I raised my shaking hands in front of me as if they had been burned by touching the blanket. I imagine I must have looked like a character in a bad horror movie, urged by a director to make motions no one would really make in real life, but that is just what I did.

They're all dead, they're all dead, they're all dead, I thought as I moved swiftly past the TV area and turned the corner. Another resident's hall.

I saw something else all the way at the end. A moving shadow on the light blue carpet, emerging into the intersection, coming around the corner. The shadow grew but then ... withdrew again. And then I heard an odd sound, a rustling.

A shadow stretched across the wall now, and right after, I saw a thin, small head, a head attached to a long, undulating neck. The thing it belonged to stepped into the intersection. It was about five feet high. A great bird on tall, spindly legs. Through the dark it looked at me, lowering its head, tilting it in curiosity. It took two clumsy, awkward steps forward. It beat its wings once, creating an echo. An ostrich.

The thing was visibly old, filthy, as if it had crawled from some tar pit. There was no real light but still I saw its eyes, specked with the glitter of pupils. Its mouth opened slowly and hung open as if it were hungry, beckoning to me to bring it something, bring myself. It made no sound, standing there with room 118 on one side of it, room 121 on the other side, doors closed, its inhabitants unaware.

I felt hypnotized, compelled to meet its vacuous gaze. It took another step forward on those ugly legs. I could hear it breathing from so far away, raspy and sick. It was challenging me to come, I think.

I broke my hypnosis with another scream. I turned and began to run. I ran past the dead man's staring eyes back toward the common area. I think I was hollering my head off, nonsensical words, hyperventilating.

The dining room had ... changed. There were no tables anymore, sitting there in the dark, though the walls were the same, the sink area and the fishtank still there in the background, the calendar of events scrawled on a whiteboard beside a refrigerator. The carpeted floor had been split by a great fissure, a crack thirty feet long but only a few feet wide, as if there had been an earthquake.

I sank to my knees, helpless, nothing but a spectator to whatever was going to happen to me. I heard moaning sounds, several human beings moaning.

Then from that crack, something emerged. A human arm, groping for something to clutch onto. Another appeared a few feet away. The head and torso of a human being popped up. An elderly woman. She was covered in that black tarlike substance. Her mouth opened and closed as if she were gasping air for the first time after living beneath the earth. Someone came out from the crack beside her, actually striking her with his left arm as he emerged as well, a skinny man in a robe, also caked in black, bald head turning this way and that to take in his new surroundings. The moaning grew as more people came out of the crack, confused by where they were and why they were cursed to live. Nine, ten, twelve of them, dressed in the nightclothes they'd gone to bed in, the residents of Waverly Mews, grasping and clutching to pull their broken bodies out of the crack in the floor. One old man had made it all the way out and began to crawl forward face down, crawl towards me.

I got my feet and ran, ran back toward the side entrance I'd come from. I pulled something in my back, aggravating my injury from the fall, but I kept moving, limping, having regained a glimmer of logical thought when the pain struck.

A door appeared at the end of a corridor; not the one I'd come in through, but I had already lost my bearings. As I ran toward it I was sure the door would somehow disappear, or be inexplicably locked, but I pushed down on the bar and it released me into the night.

I was at the rear of the building, the side facing toward the woods. Right in front of me was a small flat field beyond which lay the entrance to the walking trail that led into those woods. A sign advised residents not to enter it alone, and not after dusk. It felt safer to run towards it, so that is what I did.

I almost missed entirely a shape coming right toward me, it was so dark. The sound of a clear, sane human voice stopped me and brought me one more step back to reality. An old man, speaking in a Scottish accent. *Please help*, he said to me. It turned out to be Brian, of the couple Betty and Brian, who were friendly with Miss Jeannie and kept her up to date on my mother's condition. Brian wore a robe and slippers. I could barely make out his face. What was left of his thin strands of hair blew in front of his eyes.

I asked him what had happened and he said that there were others in the woods, and he said names I didn't recognize. A man had taken them in there, a man who had come and woken Betty and Brian and said there was a problem with the building and they all had to move far away from it until it was safe to return, and he'd led them up the path. But Brian had quickly fainted, he'd been weak, and when he woke up the others were gone. Now he was scared for Betty. *I'm scared, I'm scared*, he said again and again.

Before I could even urge him to, Brian had begun to lower himself to the grass, and I grabbed his arm and helped him down. I told him it was going to be OK, that he would be safe staying right there while I went up the path. *I was weak because of my pill*, he said feebly, every one of his eighty-some years weighing his brain and his body down.

I went into the woods. The night went from dark to black, and I firmly believe it was only the single dose of Tangerine that allowed me to see the edges of the cement path before me. They seemed highlighted by a silver tint that sometimes showed around objects when I had taken the drug. It was almost like being in a darkened theater with running lights embedded in the floor to guide my way. I saw almost no detail in the trees around me, and the sky above was

almost entirely blotted out, but the path was presented to me with merciful and seemingly impossible clarity.

The path twisted and turned. There was a large featureless heap directly in my way. I immediately thought it was a body, but no. As I approached, a deer got to its feet in a panic and sprung away off the path and into the woods.

I was sweating profusely despite a breeze that would have been lovely in any other context. A nice night for a walk in the dark. I stumbled once, just once, that imaginary film director in the back of my brain urging me somewhere to trip to enhance the artificial drama. I scraped my hands on the cement but stayed upright, plunging ever deeper, starting to limp badly.

They all came into view very suddenly around a bend, looking like inert zombies from that same film. Seven residents of Waverly Mews stood on the path, still processing the scene around them, their faces indistinct. Some turned toward me as I approached, and most of them raised arms to point me in the direction of the one who had brought them there and then, suddenly, abandoned them. One man sat against a tree with his head down, and barely had the energy to lift it to look. Their voices called out to me, urging me either to stop and help or *find him, find him, that's the way he went*.

I kept going, leaving them behind, sensing I was close. And I was. It was no more than twenty seconds before the path ended, but it was a mere ten before I felt something else pull in my back, knocking the wind and muscle out of me.

The path dumped me out onto a second open field. The stranger was there in the distance, maybe forty yards away. He had stopped and seemed to be waiting for me. The sky seemed a dark gold behind him, city lights miles away tinging the sky, and my chosen opiate distorting it in a sinister but strangely beautiful way.

He was holding my mother in his arms. I didn't need to be any closer to know in my gut it was her. I screamed out to her. Maybe I screamed *Mom* and just maybe I screamed *Mommy*, spiraling back four decades in my childlike desperation. The stranger let her go then, dropping his arms. Yet my mother hung there in suspended animation. He raised his arms again and spread them like a magician showing off: *Look what I can do*. My mother's hair hung down but she floated three feet above the ground, asleep and unaware.

I limped forward. The stranger turned and led me chase toward the thinner woods beyond, but I didn't care about him now. As I got closer to my mother the pain in my back intensified until I was gasping for air. And when I reached her and flung my arms out to protect her from a sudden descent to the grass, she vanished, winking out of existence without a sound, my right hand an inch from hers.

The gold in the sky dissolved abruptly and transformed into a deep purplish blue. The stranger was gone, though I think to this day that I saw his last few steps before he went into the shadows at the bottom of a long sloping hill. That way lay the sleepy town of Enderlee, but not for miles. A lot of ground to cover in the dark. And somehow, they never found him.

He was terribly thin, they said, and had a beard, but beyond that, it had been difficult to see his face, even as he had told them out there on the path that there was a magic trick he wanted to show them to pass the time before it was safe to return to the house. But then he had

commanded them to be still and listen, sensing someone coming, and he had snarled at them that none of them were going with him 'to meet Father Hall tonight.' Those were his words, three of them swore, a bizarre utterance of an unfamiliar name whose significance was never discovered. One resident, an eighty-two-year-old former mathematician named Lance Dulles, said he'd glimpsed the hunting knife the man carried and had used to kill the two on-duty nurses at Waverly Mews that night. One was murdered as he watched television, the other had been shoved inside the laundry room and stabbed eleven times. She had left bloodstains that I had somehow missed in the very hallway I had first entered, just beyond the door that the stranger had darkened by removing the bulbs to move in greater secrecy. He'd likely done that the night before, the police told me, a theory supported by some photos taken of the place by a visiting grandchild thirty-six hours before he went in.

Three residents had refused to go with the man into the woods that night, but he had acted quickly and convinced some others. My mother had woken to see him standing above her bed. But without a word, he left her again, having perhaps judged her too weak to walk the trail.

My mother, Eve Louisa Reickart, passed away fourteen months later. She was living with me then. I was taking care of her full-time, working at home as a medical coder so I wouldn't miss a day with her. On the day I moved her out of Waverly Mews, a week before it was closed down, I peered through the tall windows at those rooms I had seen on my nighttime visit. There was neither a drain nor a dollhouse.

My mother's dementia slowly worsened, but she always knew who I was. One night she did tap on my bedroom door and when I was asked her was what wrong, she told me she had seen something in the back yard through the window. *I saw the ostrich*, she said. I told her it would never come back, not while I was with her. That made her feel better, and she went back to bed.

But I did go the kitchen and look out. *You see things other people don't*, she used to say to me. I waited for that to happen. But the January wind blew across nothing but dying grass. My days of alcohol and drugs and even vivid flights of imagination were over. Reality continued to frighten me for a long, long time, but I am old now. Goodnight.

return

My name is Ethan Tyrell. At about 9:30 p.m. on December 22, 2005, I left work at the used bookstore I manage and drove ten miles back to the tiny house I was renting off a country road. When I went up to the front door, I saw immediately that the knob had been broken and someone had kicked the door in. I had to go inside the house to call the police because I didn't have a cellphone. When I got inside, I turned a light on to see if anything had been stolen. There was a little bit of mud on the carpet and something that looked like bits of burned paper, but no other visible evidence that someone had actually come inside after kicking the door in.

As I was walking across the living room to the phone, I detected a faint smell that at first I didn't

recognize. It was like the smell of apples, mixed with a very sour oak-like odor that got stronger as I stood there. When I realized what the smell was, I backed away from the phone, turned, and ran back out the front door. My house was secluded at the end of a long wooded drive, and as I ran through the dark I was mortally aware of how close the woods were on either side of me. I knew in my gut that something might very well come out at me from them. But I made it onto the main road, and from there it was a short run to the closest gas station. I settled myself when I got there and tried to remember the phone number I needed, but it didn't come.

Deep in my wallet I found a list of names and numbers, and it took me three calls to track down Linus Clegg. He didn't answer the phone when I called. I left a message telling him the number of the pay phone I was at, and for him to call me immediately. I waited there for more than an hour. He finally called me. He'd been out at a bar. There was very little recognition in Linus's voice, but it seemed calculated. It had been nine years since we'd last seen each other, but he couldn't have possibly forgotten who I was. He was living in Rivieros, which was forty miles north, but I convinced him to drive down and pick me up. He understood fairly quickly the danger we were now in. He had gotten much thinner in the past decade, and all his hair was gone, and he didn't look well. I got into his car, and we drove one mile to a local nursery whose parking lot wasn't closed off. We sat there in his car in the dark for two hours, discussing what needed to be done.

I had met Linus when I was eighteen and we were serving almost identical sentences at a juvenile detention center. Both were for theft. Neither one of us was much of a criminal, but we both hated the world and wanted to do anything we could to scar it somehow. When Linus left the center a month after I got out, we met in a shopping mall and hung out for a little bit with no real purpose. As we were coming out of a movie, we were approached by a man with a long gray beard who told us he was looking to hire a couple of people to do some audio work for him, just holding a microphone for a few projects. He said he would pay us two hundred dollars. Of course we said yes, and that was when we began our involvement with David Espith.

The audio work was real; it was taping David at his house reading for hours from a book written in Latin. He told us the book was about witchcraft. He sold the tapes by mail and claimed he eked out a living from doing it. There wasn't much valid point in involving us from the audio end of things. What he really wanted were two young people who were angry and desperate and gullible and who would help him with his future experiments. That was me and Linus. David used us for two and a half years. Over that time he taught us a lot about witchcraft and gave us money and made us swear we would never tell anyone what we were doing. Of course we couldn't keep quiet and we did tell some other people, but none of them really believed us or paid much attention to us.

About a year into knowing David, he told us to come over one night to videotape and audiotape one of his black masses. There was never anyone else involved in them. This one was more strange than we were ready for. He took us into the garage, and he showed us that he had a human skeleton in there, laid out on his workbench. It still had clothes on it. He had dug it up the night before. It was only partially rotted. There was still a lot of skin and hair on the body. It was a woman. From that point on, we helped David rob old graves in the middle of the night every month or so. He taught us all the finer points and techniques of how to do it. We knew it was abnormal and awful, but we were also fascinated by David. He seemed perfectly sane but couldn't have been. Everything he did was completely unusual. And we liked the dangerous

aspects of what he asked us to do. We videotaped him as he performed strange rituals with the skeletons. Sometimes he chopped them up and used just individual pieces of skeleton. His rituals were in Latin and English and French and another language I never recognized. He wouldn't tell us much about what we were seeing.

Soon we began to see that almost all of the money he made from the tapes came from the same three people. We kept seeing their names on the tapes he sent out. All three of them lived in Germany. Near the end of the time we knew David, he started drawing up plans to dig up bodies that had been put into the earth only a few days before, in heavily traveled cemeteries. He said there would be a lot of money in it, because the rituals he wanted to perform were rare and no one dared do them but him. Sometimes after a ritual David would get physically sick and wouldn't be able to go out for days. He had us bring him groceries then, and he wouldn't even come out of his bedroom.

Both Linus and I eventually matured enough to realize that David was slowly trying to seduce us into doing much darker things, and we decided we would stop going to his house. That was when Boris Dell, who was Linus's best friend, was killed in a motorcycle accident. I had met him a few times. He sold marijuana to live, but he seemed like a good guy. Linus took his death really hard. After that, he seemed to forget that we had agreed to avoid David, and sometimes he went over there on his own, which neither one of us had ever done before. I went less and less, only when I really needed the money. By then we were both seventeen and we had both moved out of our parents' houses. I had actually been kicked out. I was living in a group house and always needed cash; what I made waiting tables was never enough, so I couldn't fully break free of David's influence.

One night Linus told me on the phone that David told him it was possible to bring his friend Boris back to life. I thought he'd gone insane, but David said he would prove it soon enough, and he would do this in return for an agreement from both of us to help him with some very advanced work with his rituals. I said I wouldn't help. I never had any more contact with David. But a week later Linus came to see me and asked me if I could drive him to the cemetery where Boris was buried. He said he was feeling bad and just wanted to go over to the grave because he hadn't seen it. He hadn't gone to the funeral; he couldn't deal with it.

Of course it was a trick. We got there at dusk, and Linus said he needed my help to do something as soon as it got dark. He needed to bury a book behind Boris's tombstone. He said he'd give me one hundred and fifty dollars just to do this one thing. When I asked him why he couldn't do it himself, he said it needed to be done by someone who'd had no involvement in a ritual he and David had performed the night before. I said yes, that I'd do it, because I had begun to become afraid of them both, and I told myself that this was the best way I could extricate myself from them permanently. I had decided that I would leave town the very next day and never come back. Until then I would play along and not rouse any suspicion.

So behind Boris's headstone I buried a very old book Linus had brought from David's collection. I had to wait till full dark to do it. That was all that was required of me. I went to bed that night with all my things packed. I woke up before dawn and started to head out. I had no real idea where I was going. I stopped at the cemetery. I went back to Boris's headstone, and when it seemed safe I dug up the six inches of earth I had buried the book in and I took the thing with me. I put it into the car and I drove off.

That night I tried to read the entire book in a hotel room. Most of it was indecipherable to me

because so much was in French and Latin. But David had made some notes in the back of it. The one I remembered most vividly was his note about how when the dead rose, they carried a very specific smell with them. That smell had been very prominent around Boris's grave the morning I dug up the book. It was also there even more strongly when I went into my house on the night I came back from work to find my house had been broken into. I threw that book into a dumpster before I drove away from the motel.

Linus and I sat in his car in the parking lot of the nursery on December 22, 2005, and I told him about that smell. There was no mistaking what it meant. I asked him to look me in the eye and tell me that he really thought it was possible that he and David had somehow brought Boris back from the dead. Linus told me point blank that not only was it possible, but that David had made videotapes years before of people he had brought back. And yes, sometimes it took years for the person to return. There was no telling why, or when the person might appear. But Boris had not come back immediately after they'd made their attempt. They'd stolen his body from the funeral home and spent twenty-four hours locked inside David's house with it, performing their ritual. Long-term storage of the body was difficult and of course sick and illegal.

About a month later David had died of a heart attack in the aisle of a convenience store, just like that. He had no family, and Linus had only found out about it after going over to his house a few times and not getting any answer to his knocking. A neighbor had to tell him what happened. There was a very short article in the newspaper about what sorts of things the police had found in the house. Boris's body was not mentioned.

Linus described to me in a lot of detail what he had seen on the videotapes David had shown him. Linus told me that when he was seventeen, he thought they were real, and he still did. Now he wanted to see the physical evidence of Boris's return at my house. We drove there. When we got near the house, he said I should stay in the car and lock the doors. I didn't ask him why. We were quiet as I took the car up the dirt drive between the trees on my property. A branch that was hanging too low thumped against the passenger's side window, and Linus jerked as if he had been shot. He told me to put my high beams on so he could see more. He looked all around before he got out of the car. He seemed to be checking the shadows for any shape that might possibly be something to be feared. He went up to the door and entered the house. I kept the engine running and turned the radio on and closed my eyes. I didn't like the way the headlights shone against the trees in the distance, which let me see just a few feet into the woods and no more. It made them seem more threatening.

Just a minute later Linus came out again and got back in the car and told me to drive us to the nearest motel. He said it was best if we spent the night someplace other than our houses. I was angry, but I complied when he told me he had more to explain. On the way to the motel he told me that after David had died, he'd done his own research into the resurrection methods David had used. He claimed that was the last association he ever had with witchcraft. It took him two years to find out how dangerous the resurrection rites truly were if the slightest thing went wrong. What came back when someone was brought back to life could be something truly hideous to behold. It could be a thing with absolutely no intelligence that could not communicate but only breathe and exist, something irredeemable. Linus said that if anything really had gone wrong with Boris's resurrection, there was a chance that what came back could harm us both. The fact that it had gone searching for me, and somehow knew where I lived now, was a terrible omen. Linus hadn't been back to his own house yet, and wouldn't go back until

daylight.

I slept in the bed in the motel room while Linus stayed up in a chair and smoked and looked out the window onto the parking lot. I could barely sleep. Linus woke me at four in the morning. He had made a decision. He wanted to leave town for a while. He just needed to get a couple of things from his house. He asked me if I would go there with him first before he drove me back home. So once again, I found myself asked to do a final favor for him before we went our separate ways. This time I said no, but I reversed myself when I saw how truthful he was being when he said it was much safer if we were together when we went to his house. He was frightened for his life. We drove there and didn't say a word.

He lived in a cheap modular home surrounded by a dozen others. It was in a state of total disrepair. The sky was beginning to lighten when we pulled up before it. Linus didn't get out of the car right away. I asked him what was wrong. He told me he had lied to me. He confessed that it wasn't Boris who had come back from the dead and entered my house. Boris was never going to return. They'd had to bury his corpse at a state park when they'd realized back then that they'd botched his resurrection badly. David was incapable of understanding what made one truly work. The video-tapes he owned of other resurrected humans had all been made by one of his contacts in Germany.

The man who had actually come back from the dead was David. He hadn't died of a heart attack a decade ago. That story had been invented by Linus, who had continued his association with him all along. They had been working together all this time, far more intensely than I could imagine. I asked Linus when exactly David had really died, and why Linus had chosen to try to bring him back. He said it hadn't been his idea at all. David must have arranged it with someone else, maybe one of the Germans. He had died just two nights ago. Linus knew this because he was the one who had killed him. He had laced a glass of vodka with poison, and he'd watched David die. After that, he'd set fire to his house to destroy the body and any signs that he had ever been there.

He didn't tell me why he had killed David other than to say that the man had gotten too dangerous to completely innocent people. I started to figure out more when we went into Linus's house. Inside it looked like a museum of witchcraft. There was virtually no actual living space left. It had all been taken over by books, props, videotapes, audiotapes—all things having to do with the strain of witchcraft they had been practicing for a decade. I didn't recognize any of the stuff. It all seemed far more advanced than anything I had encountered when working for David. If anyone but me stepped inside the house, their first thought would have probably been to call the police.

I could imagine that if Linus and David had gotten deeper and deeper into that world, at some point a serious conflict might have arisen. Maybe it had become a fatal one. Judging by how badly Linus had aged in the past nine years, he must have gotten trapped in vicious mental stress and been unable to get out of it. His life had been doomed almost from the beginning. So now Linus was a killer, but I followed him into his house because he seemed so lost and so scared. The first thing Linus did was take a handgun from his desk drawer. Then he went into his bedroom to put some things in a bag.

While Linus was rummaging through his possessions, I couldn't help but take notice of a certain videotape that was labeled 'Alva Storrcott.' The name struck me instantly because it had been in the local papers for a while, years before. She was a woman who had been shot to death by

the police as she tried to drive through a roadblock set up to stop her. In the back of her van were four terrified children she'd abducted that very afternoon. She was hopelessly insane. I lifted the tape and put it into the VCR next to the bookshelf. I turned the monitor on and pushed play. If Linus came behind me, I didn't care.

The image that popped up was a still shot of a dark enclosure; it was so dark I could make out almost no detail, but I heard David's reedy voice saying something to someone else. He was asking, 'Where's the gas can?' After ten seconds an unseen hand turned on a bright floodlight, the kind that professional photographers use. Just before I heard Linus behind me asking what I was doing, I saw that the videotape was being shot inside a barn of some sort. The floodlight poured ugly white illumination over a wide patch of straw on the wooden floor. Lying on that patch of straw was a human figure wrapped in a sheet, one arm protruding. That was it; that was all I saw before I heard Linus's voice. I turned to him, and we looked at each other silently for a moment. I hit the stop button and said nothing more. Neither did he.

We started to go back out to his car. I was walking ahead of Linus as he locked his house. I saw that his hands were shaking. I stood at the passenger's side door and waited for him. The neighborhood was totally quiet. The sun was beginning to rise over the mountains in the distance, but it was still dark in the driveway. As soon as I got to the car, I detected a faint smell of apples and oak. The terror that surged through my body was so strong and so powerful that it felt like an electrocution. I heard footsteps coming from my right. When I looked in that direction, I saw a shape standing in the tiny area of dying grass that was Linus's lawn. As soon as my eyes focused on the shape and I registered what I was looking at, it made a sudden movement toward Linus. It shambled quickly and jerkily in his direction. It was only ten steps away or so, and by the time I shouted out to Linus it was too late.

He stared at the thing and almost seemed to let it come. The shape crashed into him, and the front door swung inwards and they disappeared into the shadows. My nerve failed me then. By instinct I wrenched the car door open and got in. I heard a grunting sound from the doorway and a muffled scream. I slid over to the driver's side and saw that there were no keys. Linus had them. Just before I got out of the car again and began to run away, I turned on the headlights. They threw light at the front door and into the house. I had to see what was there, just for a split second.

In that second I saw David Espith's corpse raising one hand into the air again and again and slashing at Linus's body beneath him. David's skin was blackened, and in many places it was simply gone. His legs were almost entirely bone, and the bottom half of his spinal cord was visible. He had been obese in life, but the fire that Linus had set to destroy the evidence of the poisoning had reduced him to nothing more than a freakish stick figure. Some of his clothing had been permanently charred onto his bones. But the thing that used to be David was in constant violent motion, as if he didn't understand that he wasn't alive anymore. Linus's screams were silent.

I ran away from there, and I have never found out what the police and the neighbors discovered. I had a cab pick me up from a nearby McDonald's and take me north, and after that no one ever came to ask me any questions. I refuse to look at the newspapers or watch the news on TV. Whatever was found, I think that in another three or four months all mention of it will be almost impossible to find or even stumble across accidentally. I will probably be seeing the details of David's burned face in my sleep for the rest of my life. Even in the dark I could see on the lawn that his eyes were completely gone and there was almost no flesh on his skull. But I swear he

still had a tongue, and it was moving inside his mouth when I ran from the car. He could have come for me, and he could still.

What haunts me most somehow is the memory of how the smell of his resurrection had seemed to get stronger as I stood inside my house checking for signs of burglary a few hours before he slaughtered Linus. I think David was there when I was. Or maybe it was just fear and my imagination working to make me think that. I still work at the same job, but I've been commuting to it from fifty miles away. I'm living out of my car. I haven't been back to my house. At some point maybe I'll be brave enough to go back there. But I don't know when it will be. I just don't know.

guest

My name is Kevin Le Groh. When I was sixteen I was thrown out of my house by my stepfather, the worst person I ever knew. I'd gotten into trouble from time to time, and I was definitely a problem kid as they say, but I couldn't stand all the accusations and threats he was constantly pouring on me, and we had some terrible fights. One night in October it got so bad with him yelling about some stuff I'd taken from some old abandoned farmhouse that he gave me fifteen minutes to put some things in a backpack and get out, so I did just that, my mother crying in the kitchen. I had nowhere to go and no plan. I had a total of four hundred dollars in the bank. I spent the first two days mostly wandering around the edge of town; we'd moved to that tiny backwater only a couple of months before, so I had no friends, and I had no idea where anything in the area was. I slept underneath an RV and then behind Walmart, and at about ten o'clock on night three I went to Denny's and studied a bus schedule and considered going somewhere far away. So I sat there for two hours with a soda trying to stay awake. I'd been getting no real sleep. It was pouring rain outside. I looked up at one point and across the dining room I saw one of my stepfather's golfing buddies eating pancakes, and when he looked at me I decided to had to get out of there. I went out into the rain and ran down the road about a hundred yards to the first shelter I could find, which was a bus shelter in front of a used car lot. It was too late for the bus, I knew that much. So I sat there, just being miserable, needing to sleep so bad, totally trapped. I was on Priest Oak Road, which is usually just called Route 165. Just a few cars went back and forth in the dark; on a Sunday night everything in what they called 'town' was already closed. Across the road, there wasn't anything but acre upon acre of nothing, just a vast grass hill that slowly went up toward the horizon. But there actually was something there, at the very top, if you looked hard; it was just incredibly hard to see because of the rain and the blackness of the sky. It was an old motel, out of business, lights completely out. To get to it you had to climb a long driveway to the cement courtyard. Seeing the place gave me an idea. I could make out that it had two levels and that the walkway which wrapped around the outside and connected the rooms had an overhang. So I thought I'd go up there to see if it might be a dry place to sleep. There was no way anyone would be able to see me from the road, it was much

too far away. I remember now, how right that decision felt as I stood in that bus shelter, how this odd feeling came over me that I was meant to go up there, that it was case closed that I would, and no other option was to be considered.

I started to run across 165, holding my backpack tight and pulling my jacket up over my head. No one was coming in either direction. It was a long haul up that driveway toward the motel. I could see a huge piece of tarp or plastic sheeting covering the tall motel sign that loomed up on my right. The place looked in decent condition, just one big splotch of graffiti on one of the doors, some broken glass in the cement courtyard. Out in front there was just enough overhang to keep me dry if absolutely no wind kicked up. I got under it and followed it to the edge of the first level, then decided to run back out into the rain to go around the side of the place and go up some stairs to explore the second. This would take me completely out of sight of the road at the base of that giant hill. I went up the metal stairs and the second level had a little more overhang. I felt pretty good about it. I was going to be cold all night but I had a good chance to keep dry if the rain didn't get any worse. Nothing but woods thirty yards away, going back forever.

It was so dark that I almost completely missed that the door right in front of me, room 202, was partly open, just a few inches. It was the only one I'd seen like that so far. I moved past it and went down the walkway, checking to see if there were any others open. But no. Seemed like just that one. I gave a little tug on room 204 but the lock had been permanently set or something. Room 202 seemed to be the only one where the lock mechanism had been removed entirely.

I set my backpack down and took out a flashlight. I'd shoplifted it the night before in expectation of having to roam around late at night looking for places to sleep. I pushed the door open a little more and shone it inside. I was able to see every inch of the room. It was pretty barren. The bed was gone; there was just an old dresser in its place, sitting at a diagonal. No TV of course, and no heater. The bathroom door had been taken off the hinges and the shower curtain was gone. About half the wallpaper too. A few paintings, probably the ones that used to be on the walls, were tilted against one of them now, sitting on the floor. All in all, it was just fine for sleeping in. I could push the dresser against the door for protection.

I went all the way in and closed the door against the loud sound of the rain and I was safe and dry. I set my backpack down, and then I kicked off my shoes, which had started to give me blisters. I took off my jacket and put on a sweater I took out of the backpack. My jacket, I balled up to use as a pillow. I intended to go right to sleep so I pushed that cheap dresser tight against the door. The carpet was still intact and I laid down and shut off the flashlight, setting it right next to me.

But of course it was tough to sleep in this strange place that was only about five miles from my home. I stared at the ceiling and listened to the rain. Sometimes I thought I could hear a faint engine sound from some truck down on 165. I was just starting to fade out when it happened: A knock on the door of my room. My eyes flew open and my heart almost exploded. I brought myself up on my elbows and fixed my gaze on the black shape of the dresser that I had pushed in front of the door. Even so, the door could be opened inward a few inches or so, and that would be enough to tell whoever was outside that someone was in here. And as I feared, the door did suddenly open, clunking against the dresser. The sound of the rain rushed in and I made out the shape of a head out there as I scrambled to my feet. I heard a man's voice, saying something in a language I couldn't make out. I grabbed the flashlight and switched it on and pointed it into

the crack of dim light that had appeared. And I saw his face. The man squinted and held both his hands up in a deferential way and kept speaking, something that was just gibberish to me. He was a tall man with a really bad home-done haircut, blonde shoulder-length hair it was. You'd almost mistake him for a woman. His eyes were kind of sunken and emaciated. Homeless, probably. He nodded at me again and again and said, 'OK, OK.' He made the classic symbol of bedtime, tilting his head against his flattened hands, then pointing to himself and off to his left, further down the upper walkway, as if to tell me where he himself was sleeping. He nodded again and waved and disappeared, pulling the door closed, then walked away. He meant me no harm. A fellow traveler, not even from this country, lost. But why had he tried to get in here, I thought, and where exactly was he sleeping, when I didn't think I'd seen any other place that could be accessed.

I stood in the middle of the room for a while, waiting for my heart to stop pounding. When it did I moved to the dresser and very gently, trying not to make any more sound than I needed to, pushed it away from the door so I could open it. I held the flashlight tight in my hand, but I didn't turn it on; I just wanted something blunt in my hands. I opened the door a crack and waited for any sound besides the rain. When nothing came, I stuck my head out and looked down the walkway to the right. It was empty. I stepped halfway out, just halfway, to get a slightly better look at the row of doors. Almost as soon as I did, there was a click as one of them opened. I froze up. That man came out of room 208. He saw me immediately, and he held a hand up again as he came slowly back toward me, doing everything he could not to frighten me. He was just a silhouette but I could see he was holding a small object. He stopped a careful distance from me and held it out, nodding toward it and speaking a few words in that language that didn't seem to be German or French or Spanish but something kind of... in between. I turned the flashlight on, I had to. The beam fell across his hand and made the rest of him appear in a dim yellow glow. I saw that his jacket was worse than mine was, some green windbreaker with the logo of a minor league baseball team on it. He was holding a single wrapped hamburger, a hamburger from McDonald's. He wanted me to take it. I shook my head and waved him off but he held it up a little higher. More out of fear of what he might do if I refused again than really wanting the thing, I took a step forward and took it from him. He nodded, said, 'OK', and waved once more. Then he retreated back into his own room and closed the door just as I returned the wave. I kicked myself for not really checking those locks more closely, just assuming every door was in fact permanently shut when obviously that wasn't the case.

I went back into room 202, shoved the dresser more tightly against the door, leaving the hamburger on it, and sat down on the floor. I realized I had a long night ahead of me, trying to get to sleep knowing this stranger was just three doors away. The place had been ruined for me, but the rain kept falling and it was getting colder out there all the time. I shone the flashlight briefly around to make sure I hadn't missed something that I could maybe stack onto the dresser to make it heavier, but there were just those three big paintings resting on the floor and leaning against the wall, kind of fanned out so I could see a little of each. Three seascapes, looked like, exactly like something you've seen a million times in bad motels and restaurants.

Nothing to do but wait for sleep to come. From my backpack I pulled out a local newspaper I'd bought because there was a story I definitely wanted to read, shining the flashlight on it. It was about an old homeless woman named Uta Harratt who'd just been killed near where I'd lived until three days ago. She'd been camping out, apparently, in the burned-out ruins of a farmhouse from the nineteen twenties, it didn't even have a roof anymore. She'd been stabbed many, many times, died of blood loss. Her son, Otto, was 40 years old and also apparently

homeless. They traveled together. The police were looking for him but they wouldn't say if he was a suspect.

The reason I wanted to read that was because I'd been at that farmhouse recently. Even before my stepfather threw me out, I'd been out walking one day, and actually wondering about some places I might sleep if it came to that, because it constantly seemed like it would. And I'd gone in there, it was only two miles from my house, and left again, just thinking it was an empty place I might go to in a pinch. I'd never been back.

I put the paper away and I moved my balled-up jacket closer to the paintings near the wall because it felt good to be farther away from the door, and the window. I laid down and I'm not sure exactly what was going through my mind when I passed entirely into unconsciousness. I remember my dream, though. In it, a policeman was in that farmhouse, and looking down at a footprint I'd left without thinking. He was bending down to look at it and asking someone to get some pictures of it so he could run some tests. He was saying he had a theory about it, and watching him from inside a closet nearby, I thought to myself in the dream, *No no, I just happened to be there, don't you understand? This is all a big misunderstanding.*

I woke up completely disoriented. It took me a few seconds to get a handle on where I was. My head had rolled off my jacket and I'd slept with it right on the carpet, face up, a good two feet away, even closer to the wall. What had woken me was cool air on my face, a tiny stream coming from somewhere. I sat up a little and groped around for the flashlight, then shone it on my watch. It was 3:50 a.m. I'd been out for a couple of hours. It was *still* raining, coming down hard.

When I sat up, I no longer felt that stream of air on me. The door to room 202 was still closed, thank God, so it wasn't coming from there. I lay down again, exactly where I'd been, about ten inches from the wall where those paintings were laid against it. The air came back, almost unnoticeable if I wasn't really focusing on it.

I stood up in the dark and I lifted the first painting, setting it aside, then the second, then the third. Picking up that last one, the big hole in the wall behind it became visible instantly, so big I could have even seen it in the dark, without the help of the flashlight. Almost three feet high and two feet wide. It had taken more than one painting to mask it. And that's just what they'd been doing there, hiding this gouge in the wall that opened on total blackness and shadow.

Crouching down, the beam of the flashlight showed me a passage of about four feet, leading into the adjacent room, 204. I could see a bit of floor, but nothing else. I didn't even see any debris around where the hole had been punched or dug or clawed out.

I sat down before the hole, cross-legged, pointing the flashlight just so to get a little bit more of a view into the next room, but the angle wasn't enough to tell me much. So I shut the flashlight off and stayed still and quiet for a time, trying to figure out just what I was looking at, and why.

From beyond my room, outside, there came a sound I hadn't heard yet since I'd come across this place. A car engine, but not one so far away that it could have been mistaken for something else. This was close, and coming closer. It sounded like a car might be coming up that long slope and was now very near the motel. I got up and went to the window and with two fingers I parted two slats of the blinds. After a few seconds, headlights were illuminating the thin strip of

cracked pavement that wound all the way around the motel, and the car was coming from the front of the place to the back. The headlights briefly showed me the densely packed screen of trees thirty yards beyond the property, and then the car came around the corner, moving at walking speed. The walkway blocked my view of the car itself. All I got was what the headlights saw through that weird mist their beams made in the rain. Whoever it was, they were checking the place out, or looking for someone maybe. The car rolled real slow past room 202 and then the others, moving off toward the edge of the building. Unless it reversed it would have had to go around the opposite side. I moved away from the window when I was satisfied it did.

I heard a soft thud out there then. A door. The faintest trace of a shadow moved past my window and I froze, holding my breath. The guy from room 208—I assumed that was him—went by, walking at a normal pace past my room, then down the walkway toward the steps that led to the tarmac. The shadow was gone soon enough, not pausing. I could hear faint, slow footsteps on that metal staircase, disappearing. My first thought was, Good, maybe the guy had a ride out of here. Maybe I could breathe easier.

I turned my attention back to that hole in the wall. I got on my hands and knees and stuck my head into the gap, and then decided to go forward, the flashlight clenched in my right hand. As strangely right as the decision to approach the motel had felt, this on the other hand felt wrong, it felt bad. But my curiosity was too intense. I had to shimmy carefully to not get a scratch or two; I was a little too big for the space. There was a powerful smell of mold. I listened for a minute to make sure I wasn't about to come out into a room where someone would be shocked by my appearance, and then I emerged on the other side of the hole into room 204, and I stood up inside it. My flashlight blipped out for a second and I gave it a little shake to kick it into life again. Just like my room, 202, this one was barren. The difference was, this one was in far worse shape. Wood splinters and glass shards were everywhere, the carpet was half gone, there was a big pile of *deconstruction* debris in one corner.

Here's what was really weird. There was another hole. In roughly the same position as the one on my side, but closer to the bathroom. This one was a little bit bigger. There'd been no attempt to cover this one up. The one on my side, that was the one someone had hidden.

The hole would lead to room 206. If I went into the adjacent room and there was a hole *there*, that would lead to the room where the stranger had gone into.

I crouched and stuck my head in, and shone the flashlight around, waiting longer this time. I didn't even have to get down on my hands and knees this time; the hole was big enough for me to merely crouch over at the waist and sidestep through.

206 was pretty much a disaster, like 204. I had to step carefully over debris to avoid making too much noise. I was relieved to see that the far wall was intact. No exit through it. So maybe construction guys had punched those holes? I shone the flashlight into the bathroom, where there were bits of porcelain everywhere; the bathtub had been broken apart into a million tiny bits. I crossed the threshold into the bathroom and when I turned to the right, there it was, the hole into 208. Beside the sink area. Almost four feet high, I'd say.

It was probably because I was so afraid of the stranger coming back at any moment that I didn't wait very long to creep into that hole. I had to step on a small pile of porcelain bits to enter it; they cracked underneath my shoes. Then, into and through the pitch dark that lay between the motel's walls.

When I came out on a diagonal into room 208, I saw right away that like the others, there was no bed, no real furniture at all, but it had been cleaned up a little, though not nearly as much as mine. The beam of the flashlight bounced across something tall only a few feet away from me, and my brain screamed at me that someone was here, but it wasn't a person. I was confused by what I was seeing. Standing in the center of the room, grouped together to form an enclosed square, were four oblong pieces of wood about five feet high and two feet wide, each rooted by a built-in stand that kept them perfectly upright. There was enough of a gap between each that I could step into the square area and see that these were four tall mirrors, facing one another, all of them in very good condition, not something left behind when the motel closed, or scavenged from some junkyard. In the center of the square was a chair and a tiny card table. On the table was a short thick candle that had been blown out, and a scattered bunch of what looked at first like Scrabble tiles, little one inch pieces of wood with letters on them, but no, that wasn't quite right. They all had letters A through Z but each had been made by hand from different materials; some were similar wooden bits, some were stones that happened to have a surface flat enough to mark with a letter, some looked like bits of cardboard. Six or seven of the pieces were actually small shards of glass, the letters handwritten on their reflective surface with marker, and maybe that would explain why one of the tall mirrors was broken at the bottom. More letters needed, not enough material to make them. There were dozens of handmade letter pieces in all, and in the middle of the random jumble, several had been roughly connected together into what passed for a couple of sentences. The first read, MAKE THE ROOM. The one right below it read, I HAVE DRAWN HIM. Sentences in English, not whatever language the man from room 208 spoke. There was a third grouping of words too, several inches below these. Not quite a sentence this time, but three words that made sense together all the same: WHILE HE SLEEPS. The stranger had sat here by candlelight in this strange formation, mirrors on all sides of him, reflecting himself from every angle, barely enough room to move, and...done what? I picked up an object from the carpet beside the table: a piece of thin board, leaning against it, folded in half. I opened it and saw a Ouija board, the kind you'd buy anywhere. Whether it was still to be used that night, or had already been used but found to be insufficient, I'd never find out.

I left it where it was and turned and moved back to the hole. I needed to retrieve my backpack from room 202 and then I would get out of there fast. My hands had begun to shake and the flashlight beam wasn't very steady as I went.

I had crossed through room 206 and was headed into 204 when a sound made me stop inside the black gap that separated the two. The rain outside had suddenly gotten the tiniest bit louder, and then faded again. I poked my head out into 204 just a few inches and saw that the door had not opened. If some door had, it must have been further ahead of me. Which meant *my* room. 202. I froze and listened for something more. Maddening silence, no sound of a dresser being moved. Maybe I'd been wrong and it had just been a wind gust slapping the rain against the door harder than normal, fooling me. But I decided my backpack could stay where it was. I backed out of the hole into 206, turned, and as quietly as I could I moved across the room, headed back where I'd just come from. 206 into 208, and I was stepping back into the stranger's room, and even though I was sure he wasn't there, that he couldn't possibly have entered from outside in the time I'd been gone, I was terrified. I moved past the mirrors and to the door. I pulled on it and it came open easily. The sound of the rain out there sounded deafening to me after all that silence. I stuck my head out and looked to the left.

There was nobody on the walkway. From this angle I couldn't see much, and certainly not if 202 had been entered. I would never know. I came out of 208 and took a right, not a left. I walked quickly down the walkway. I reached the stairs and took them swiftly down, six, eight, ten, then I was on the lower level, the second story now safely above me. I hesitated for one moment, deciding which direction to go in. To the right was the rear side of the motel, an unknown, where that car had gone. To the left would be the front, and the long downslope that would eventually lead to the road. I had to go that way, toward where there might eventually be people, and where I'd at least be able to see signs of life as I went, even if it was just the lights of the used car lot. The woods, so close, were not an option.

So I turned left and walked underneath the walkway, still dry, passing doors, each room sealed as far as I knew. I tilted my head upwards as I went in the faint expectation of detecting some sound above me. Soon I was directly under my old room and would emerge in a moment into the rain. I pressed on, passing the stairs, and with no backpack or jacket, found myself suddenly getting drenched, my flashlight tucked under one arm.

I started to trot around the side of the building, picking up speed. I would have veered off directly to the top of the hill and made my way down the slope using the wet grass rather than the driveway, which was farther away, but I caught sight of something in the motel's courtyard that made me stop.

It was the car, presumably the one I'd detected cruising past before. It had never left the property. Now it was sitting in the courtyard, a dark hulk, perfectly still, lights off, but its engine was on. Instead of pulling into one of the spaces in front of the rooms, it had parked right here, in the middle of everything. It was facing the motel. To my right, far away, I saw route 165 at the end of the long downslope, devoid of traffic at this hour.

But I couldn't go down the hill just yet. Sensing something was odd with the car, I took hold of my flashlight and switched it on. Fifty feet away, the driver's side door of the car was wide open, as if someone had gotten out and hadn't come back yet, foolishly inviting the rain to get in. The flashlight revealed to me also that the car was a dark color, it looked like red, and that the license plate number was YOC 418. It was my stepfather's car. There was no mistake. He'd come here looking for me. The scenario flashed through my mind in an instant. His golfing buddy had seen me in the restaurant, had mentioned it to my stepfather, and the man had gone out in the middle of the night, playing hunches all over town, looking for me for hours. But it wouldn't have been his idea. It would have been my mother making him do it, probably, still worried for me.

The car sat, idling, no sign of its driver. I started to walk toward it, keeping one eye on the shadows that had swallowed the motel and the rows of locked rooms.

Something was horribly wrong here. That open door. There was one way I could feel safe, and that was to get into the car and close the door and lock it. When I was ten feet away I moved much more swiftly, and I entered the car all in one motion, my left hand reaching out to grab the interior door handle, my right tossing the flashlight into the interior, onto the floor where the gas pedal was, just for now, and I was moving into the car so quickly, with such intent, that I was already halfway in the driver's seat when I realized I was not alone.

I hadn't quite pulled the door shut when I became aware of the person in the passenger's seat. The person was moving, lifting something up toward me, something large. A hand grabbed my

right shoulder and a male voice said, Don't move. By the aura from the small pool of light generated by the flashlight beside the gas pedal, I could see that it was the blade of a machete that was near my throat, and it was held by the homeless stranger. His English was perfect, not even a trace of an accent. He was also holding something in his left hand, down near his waist, something very small, I couldn't see just what.

My breathing stopped. The sights inside the car seemed brighter than they should have been; my night vision had sharpened somehow because of the adrenalin. I didn't move an inch. My left hand stayed on the door handle.

My passenger said to me, We're going to Mahogany Glen, and that was all. Somehow through my fear I knew immediately what I was going to do. I pulled the driver's side door closed slowly but firmly. The movement caused the blade of the machete to touch my chest ever so slightly. I put my hand on the gear shift and put it into drive, and slowly dragged my eyes away from the stranger. I'd been able to determine that what he was holding in his left hand was a photograph, but its content was too dim for me to see.

It became obvious that there would be no further instruction. So I lifted my foot off the brake and the car rolled forward. I turned the wheel to the right and the car began to swing around toward the slope. When we had straightened out and were aimed at the top of the drive, I turned the wipers on. The blade of the machete was held very steady by the stranger. I stared straight through the windshield. Then I turned the headlights on.

There was a body just ahead, lying on the cement near the peak of the slope. The person was wearing a blue raincoat, and legs wrapped in old jeans stuck out of it. It was a man, and one of his sneakers had fallen off. His head was gone. His head was gone.

Some icy part of my mind kept me going through the motions of driving, maybe because it wouldn't have to hold on for too long before I ended this. Just a few more seconds. I let go of the brake and we rolled forward. I turned the wheel just a little to the right to avoid rolling over the dead body. We started onto the cracked cement downslope that led away from the motel. The rain made it tough to see even with the headlights. We moved past the tall lonely sign, wrapped in tarp. The wipers went back and forth, back and forth. Halfway down the drive is when I slammed my foot on the accelerator.

The stranger let out a strangled noise of shock as he rocked backward. The blade tapped my chest but the stranger had panicked and in trying to right himself he wasn't able to keep it steady, much less swing it. We roared down the slope toward 165, hitting potholes in the cement surface of the drive, our bodies shaking wildly. The stranger was looking through the window now, his eyes wide, bracing himself for what was about to happen. I was screaming. The car hit the uneven ridge separating the end of the drive from the road and there was a tremendous thud and I had just enough control to turn the wheel crazily to the left, flinging the stranger toward the passenger's side window. There was a burst of light through the car's windows and I heard the squealing of someone else's tires on wet pavement just as I slammed on the almost useless brakes, and the crash came, a Jeep Cherokee moving east hitting us hard from behind, and everything in my mind went dark.

When I was next conscious I was standing in the rain. I did not know my name or where I was. All I knew was light and dark, shapes, the cold, the wetness. The wreckage of the cars seemed to be all around me. A third one had hit us both. I looked down at my hand. It was entirely red,

as if I had plunged it into a sea of blood and taken it out again. The rain started to wash it off. I began to walk in a small circle, having no idea why, or what I was looking for. I looked down and saw on the tarmac a machete, old and dirty. And near that, a little square piece of paper. I reached down and picked it up, curious. It was a photograph. I'd seen it before, a few minutes earlier. My passenger had been holding it inside the car. The photo was black and white and creased and fading, from a time long before mine. The woman in it was very young, no more than twenty, unsmiling, unattractive, strange-looking. I heard sirens and I lay down on the road and went to sleep with that photograph in my hand.

That all happened six years ago. Three weeks after Otto Harratt killed my stepfather, and was then killed himself in the car crash I created, there came a day—Halloween, as I recall—when the police seemed to have no more questions for me. I took my mother's car and drove out to Mahogany Glen. Mahogany Glen is a cemetery. When I was certain no one else was there, I got out, and walking with a limp, strolled around for a while in the poor part of it, where it seemed they buried people without much money, or any at all. One of the graves, I knew, was Uta Harratt's, but some were unmarked, so I'd never know for sure. Another was probably her son Otto's.

I wonder what kind of woman she really was, that she could send her mentally unbalanced son those messages I found in room 208. And him knowing how to receive them. What kind of people were they both, these homeless freaks no one noticed. Here's the thing about those messages: Yeah, from time to time since I was 14 or so I've had these 'episodes' I guess you'd call them, sometimes a whole week long, where things get dark and I lose track of where I am and why I want what I want, and bad things can happen to people, even random people. Not even my mother was safe from the episodes in the end. It could be that I didn't poke around Uta Harratt's rotting farmhouse shelter just that one time, *after* she died. Maybe I was responsible for more than I remember. Anyway, whatever she and her son had planned for me that night, it didn't work. And now I doubt she has anyone left to act through. I feel for her in that way, sort of. It's awful being alone.

castle

My last name is Forcz, and people often ask about my nationality. I tell them I'm Romanian-Hungarian. Several years ago I became very interested in the history of my family, a phase a lot of people go through. I actually hired a genealogist to help me trace the family tree; she was able to take it back about 200 years. The person I was most interested in was my great-great-grandfather, Ascherl, because I already had the most information about him. He lived in Romania all his life and had been a carpenter. He'd never left Europe. With the help of the genealogist and a cousin of mine in Lancashire, England, who I visited specifically with the purpose of finding out more about the family, I tracked down my great-great-grandfather's old books and papers. Quite a few now survive in an old storage facility, where we keep a lot of

family heirlooms for posterity. Going through all those old papers, I came across a diary he kept from the age of thirty-nine until he was about forty-two. It was written in Hungarian, and unfortunately my Hungarian is incredibly thin. I did manage to finally get through the diary though, and about two-thirds of the way through it, I came across about twenty-five pages that absolutely stunned me. The contents of those pages are what I want to relate. They are not dated, but from context I can tell the events took place around the year 1893. Here is what Ascherl Forcz wrote back then of one particular long winter's night:

'We met at the southern end of the Bergel. For Hardisch and I it was a single day's journey by horseback. For the policeman, Clemendrada, it was another day by train from Bistritz. I consider Hardisch to be one of the bravest men I have ever known, a true war hero, and it saddens me that most people will never know the depths of his courage. I do not know this Clemendrada at all, this policeman. I believe his motivations on this night are due mostly to the cache of silver he expects to recover from the castle. He says that he does not believe in old wives' tales. He's very obese, and quite profane.'

There's a gap here in the diary. The rest of Ascherl's account was written after the night he speaks of was finally over:

'We met at the inn and wasted too much time planning, and with Clemendrada haggling over the price of the carriage, which had suddenly risen. We had agreed that we would tell people we were surveyors. Hardisch was very edgy from the beginning, even more so than myself, although it was I who had the most rage in me. We eventually settled the price of the carriage and went off. I carried a single stake in my bag. Hardisch had a stake and a pistol and a very long iron bar. The policeman Clemendrada had two pistols and that was enough for him. I was also carrying along as many matches as I could. It was very important that I protect them. The weather was very, very cold. It had already begun to snow and we weren't certain how this would affect our journey.

'It was an hour and a half until we came to Todezto. It was only about eight o'clock at that time, but in the village there was not a single light to be seen anywhere as we went through in the carriage. Clemendrada asked Hardisch, when he thought I could not hear him, which house had belonged to my wife's sister. Hardisch pointed it out. It was one of the smallest houses in the village, now very dark. I knew, but maybe the policeman did not know, that Todezto was always like this even before Isa had been abducted. She was 21. Clemendrada was stunned that no one walked down the road and that not even the pub was open for business, as if everyone was hiding. Of course, that's exactly the case in Todezto, cursed by geography.

'The snow continued to fall, but it didn't seem like it was going to be a real problem. We rode on past that point for another half an hour, not speaking much. Once in a while Clemendrada would say something, ask about the area, which was very foreign to him, and Hardisch answered those questions. I could say little or nothing. The pass narrowed at one point, as we knew that it would. We had been there before, but it had been quite a while. Hardisch had the horses going at a solid trotting speed when suddenly he cried out and got them to stop very quickly. We couldn't see very well. There were woods on both sides of us. It was quite dark. Clouds in the sky, blocking the stars. When I got out of the carriage, I saw what Hardisch did,

which was that an enormous pit had been cut out of the pass. A pit about ten meters across and as much as two meters deep in some places, dug out messily, blocking the road. Had the horses not been urged to stop, they might have gone into it. That would have been a terrible accident. We walked around and around the pit. It was obviously an intentional construction, not an accident of nature. We were trying to figure out how to get around it when Hardisch said to me, 'What is that over there?' We could see through the gloom that there was a man sitting slumped at the base of a nearby tree, and we could see that there was a shovel sitting next to him, leaning against that tree. I walked over to him. It was too dark to see his face. I asked him if it was he who had made this pit, and if so, why he had done it. It must have taken him hours and hours, if not days. But from this man came no response, though his head did tilt upwards. I reached into my pocket and pulled out one of my matches, and I struck it and held it up toward the man, hoping that the snow would not snuff it out. I saw him fully. I was disgusted and horrified at his incredibly white, grayish pallor. The bones of his thin face pushed out grotesquely, and he gazed up at me with lifeless eyes. His mouth opened and closed as if to speak, but no sound came out. I saw that on the left side of his neck was a grouping of garish, very slowly healing wounds, spreading out several inches in every direction, as if he had been bitten by some animal, not once, twice or even five times, but methodically chewed at over the course of time. Hardisch and Clemendrada had stepped up beside me. Clemendrada poked at the man with his finger, demanding an answer, but it was obvious that we would not get one. We decided to unhitch the horses. I and Hardisch would ride on one, Clemendrada would take the other and we would simply move on. We had no choice. The carriage had to be left behind.

'Eventually we came to the river. We tied up the horses at the place we had arranged, and our raft was indeed waiting for us, the one we had paid the gypsies for. It was fully prepared, though there wasn't much to prepare. We climbed onto it. The wind was getting higher and the cold had sunk into our bones, but we were still dry. Hardisch pushed us off and the current took us from there very slowly eastward. There was nothing to do then but hunker down and wait. We looked up at the sky and said nothing. My matches were still dry inside my coat, close to my heart. It was ninety minutes of drifting down the river, woods on either side of us. The mountains seemed to come nearer and nearer. At one point, Clemendrada lifted an arm and pointed into the distance. We looked up and we saw the silhouette of the castle there. I could not take my eyes off it as we got closer and closer until the raft took us finally to our place of disembarkation. We tied it up to shore and started to make our way through the woods, which began just a little ways up the bank.

'We went past the corpse of a horse that had been bled dry, so much so that it seemed to have shrunk. Under the moonlight it appeared quite white, almost hairless. There were punctures all over its body. We tried not to look at it too carefully. As we made our way to the castle the structure grew larger in our vision, and we used it as a guide, making our way through the trees, our feet crunching in the snow. It was only another mile until we emerged from the trees and were virtually on the castle grounds. We climbed a very steep hill, our breath coming in short spurts, all of us beginning to pant from the effort. I looked straight up. The castle was right before us, reaching up into the sky. I made a great effort not to look up toward any of the windows, lest I see faces looking down at me. Instead, I concentrated on what was immediately in front of us.

'There was a wall that blocked off a courtyard. I pressed my hands against the stone, and was amazed to feel how incredibly old and crumbling the castle truly was. It was in terrible, terrible condition. Mossy rot was growing everywhere, over every stone. It felt like the entire edifice could come apart in my hands. Hardisch spotted a hole at a spot high on one of the walls, and

began to clamber up toward it. It was about eight feet above our heads. When he reached the hole, he told us that he could see into the courtyard and he looked down into it. We followed. Clemendrada climbed first and I came after him. Then the grass below our feet had been replaced by stone. Where we stood there were two very large doors leading into the castle, both bolted. Hardisch went up to the one closest to us and bent to examine the lock. Clemendrada gave him the iron bar that he had been carrying. We all looked at each other and knew what had to be done. Haddish positioned it against the lock in such a way that he hoped to break it with one swift motion of the iron bar. We shrank against the thought of the sound it would create. On some silent count he went ahead and tried to shatter the lock. It did in fact come apart very easily, but the sound was like a shot in the silence. We stood for a time, looking up and around us, all three of us lost in the shadows of this enormous castle. We waited for some sound, some vision to emerge from the darkness.

‘Hardisch pushed the large door inward. Its creak echoed across the stones beneath our feet. He pushed himself through and we followed. Then we were inside the castle. It was pure darkness. All three of us lit matches. It seemed that the air was so heavy that their light would only last for bare seconds before fading and dying. We saw in front of us that there were three pathways, almost like fate, three ways to go and three men. Clemendrada wished to go into the longest passage. He believed it would lead deeper into the castle and upwards. Hardisch and I allowed him to make his own decision. Hardisch would go toward the right where it was darkest and no turns could be seen, and I would go to my left, toward a tunnel that seemed to slope downwards, which would take me below the earth. We all looked at each other one last time and decided to go our separate ways. My companions both disappeared quickly into the darkness. It was incredibly cold in the castle, the stones conducting the cold all through me.

‘I did not want to use any more of my matches than I had to, but it was simply too dark. I lit them one by one, taking them out of my coat to guide my way. The tunnel that lay before me did in fact curve downward. There was moss under my feet, making my steps virtually silent. I had to bend over slightly as I made my way. The rock walls on either side of me were ancient and crumbling. There were huge gaps in them at various points. I thought I could hear the scurrying of rats. My eyes tried to adjust to the darkness somewhat, but it was very difficult going. I walked for about five minutes, gently descending underneath the castle.

‘At some point I began to hear the trickle of water. As I kept going, the trickle got louder until it was almost as if there were a stream running nearby. I ducked into a very narrow passage, took a right turn, and the passage became very thin and filled with crumbled rock, as if there had been some sort of effort to break down another portion of the castle and put the leavings in here. As I went through this passageway, I saw running water against what I thought was the north wall of the castle. Yes, it was a stream, a very thin, black stream trickling past me. I stood for a time watching it, wondering where it was coming from. As I stood there, something appeared in the water, moving along very slowly. I got closer to the stream and I saw that it was vellum, pages that had been torn from a very large book, two pieces, then five pieces, then twelve and then those pages were gone. Before the last one could get past me, I reached out and touched one of them and picked it out of the water, which was icy. I folded the piece of paper and took it. Even now I'm not sure why I did that.

‘The air in the castle seemed to be becoming heavier and heavier with each passing minute. I got my pocket watch out of my coat and I checked the time, and I was confused by what I saw. It told me that I had been in the castle already for thirty minutes, but that seemed impossible. I

felt lightheaded and strangely warm inside my skin. It was as if the air was poisoning me little by little.

'I had crouched down to reach into the stream, and now I stood up and decided to keep going downward ever further. At my rate of descent, I judged I was probably forty or fifty meters below the earth. Around one more curve there was a dead end. I was in a large room, and I had more space to breathe, and felt not so claustrophobic. I lit a new match and looked around me. There were objects here lying against the walls. I saw that these were stone coffins, incredibly ancient. Most of them broken, pieces missing, various colors of rot streaking their surfaces. There were larger stones embedded in smaller ones inside the walls, and these had markings on them in a language I didn't understand. I was surrounded by a ring of eight or nine coffins, resting vertically against the stone walls as if some sort of rearrangement was underway, as if they were being moved from one place to another. I did not have the courage to investigate these coffins. They struck me as being so old that I was looking perhaps at the entombed mummies of ancient ancestors.

'There did not seem to be anywhere for me to go. I had reached a dead end. As I stood there wondering what to do next, there finally came a sound of human presence. It was of running feet very, very far in the distance, running feet on a stone surface high above my head. The sound was conducted through the castle's mysterious passageways for about five or ten seconds, and then it stopped. I stood for a time, waiting to see if they would come again, but they did not. I had no way of knowing whose footsteps those were, or exactly how far away they were. I intended then to turn and head back, but I found myself powerless to move. My limbs felt so heavy, my brain in a fog. It was that air, that castle air and some sort of evil mixture of age and corruption sinking into me. When I checked my pocket watch again, it told me that I had been here for one hour and fifteen minutes. I felt my memory slipping. Finally, I shook myself out of this trance and began to walk back the way I had come, hoping against hope that I remembered how to get back above ground.

'There were a few turns, and the castle's passageways guided me back. The most difficult part was entering a narrow passageway where the ceiling suddenly became much lower to the ground, and I had to bend over halfway, hunched. I was running out of matches, and I felt I could go through the passage without the aid of any sort of light, but halfway through I became very frightened, so I struck one.

'Looking ahead toward the end of the passage, I saw an object on the mossy ground. It was a human hand. I believed it was severed. I had somehow walked right over it as I'd gone deeper into the castle. I walked closer to it and knelt down. But it was not a severed hand I was looking at. Instead, it was connected to some living being I could not see, and it was simply protruding from the tiniest of holes in that mossy floor. The hand had reached up through this hole, and now lay dormant but slightly twitching, as if it were waiting for something to pass by that it could seize. The fingernails were painted. It was of incredible age, so withered by years. Something compelled me to reach out to it. I touched the tip of one of its fingers, and when I did so it withdrew an inch, but it did not retract into the hole. That was enough to send me onward, not looking downward anymore.

'I went through that tunnel and I kept on my way, trying to remain focused. I tried to picture my wife's sister, her face. She was the reason I was here. I heard the trickle of that stream again, and I moved past it, and I felt myself moving back upward, and I finally did come once again to that joining of three dark passageways. We had agreed to meet right here, but there was no one.

It was only me. I listened for footsteps. I decided to exit through the door from which we had entered. I pushed my way out and was struck by a blast of cold wind. It was still snowing. I took a few steps out into that barren, cramped courtyard. I looked up at the rising wall of the castle, and I saw, in the moonlight, from a window cut into the stone high above me, a rope dangling downward. Tied to the rope, hanging upside down, was the policeman Clemendrada, motionless, his face pressed against the stone of the castle wall. More rope stretched from his wrist, and this piece was tied to the leg of another man, who was also dangling upside down, gently nudged by the wind. This was Hardisch. They were too high above me to see faces, but I could tell they were dead. They had been pushed out that window and left to hang.

'Instead of running away, I found myself turning very slowly, losing all hope and knowing that I was going to die on this night. A greater man than I would have been pushed toward greater vengeance, energized by this sight, but not me. I am weak. I lost the last of my light at that moment. I knew I would never see my wife again. I climbed up the rock that we had scaled almost two hours before, and I went through the hole, and I dropped out of the other side into the grass. I was outside the castle, and I stumbled toward the woods very slowly, waiting for anything to come along and kill me, put me out of my considerable misery. Step after step I crunched through the snow, through the woods beyond the castle. Only because nothing stopped me did I go on, not thinking about the sharp wooden stake I had in my pack, but thinking only of those bodies tied up to hang outside the castle as a warning, as a sign, or simply out of convenience.

'The next thing I remember, I was on the raft. I untied it and lay down upon it. Without Hardisch or Clemendrada, I had no chance to row upstream against the current, so when I pushed off I merely drifted east even further, not exactly certain what lay beyond. I lay on my back and looked up at the cloudy sky, and cursed my life. The time passed as I drifted in and out of consciousness.

'It was shortly before dawn that I found the strength to sit up on the raft as I drifted. I looked down the river and I saw that I was coming to an embankment, and that soon my progress would be stopped by this sandy bank, but it was not empty. There was someone standing knee deep in the water.

'I drew closer to the tall silhouette of a man, a man in some sort of cloak standing and waiting for me to approach via the tide. Beside this man was another figure, a much smaller one, which struck me as feminine, though I couldn't quite see. Seeing these two figures frightened me so badly that I laid back down and closed my eyes, and only waited. The minutes passed, and I finally felt the raft bump against the shore. Looking up, terror engulfed me as I saw a figure standing to my left. It was a woman, and as I rose to my feet to look at her, I saw it was Isa. She was alive. She was shivering in the cold. She spoke my name. She seemed so pale and thin. I threw my arms around her and began to cry, and the last glimmer of sanity I possessed left me just enough reason to pull back at one point and look at her neck. There were no markings there, and no wounds. I was looking at her as she truly was. After so many months, she was alive.

'I will not say in this diary how I came to return her to her home in Todezto. I will only say that she has no memory of her time away from us, no memory of the night seven months ago when she was stolen. We are simply grateful for her return. The doctors examined her and found nothing wrong with her except for her emaciation and dehydration, and a brain fever that had stolen her memory. Why Isa was returned to us, we will never know. My wife is grateful to me

for what she considers heroism, but I am sure I will always live in shame for my inaction after I saw the bodies of Hardisch and Clemendrada. I should have gone back into the castle to kill its lord, no matter the threat, as I had meant to when the night began.'

That is where my great-great-grandfather's diary ends. It resumes again on completely unrelated matters, in the summertime. I possess today one other document of note. Only because the style of vellum and the handwriting upon this single page are so different from anything else that we found at my great-great-grandfather's home do I assume that it's the object that Ascherl brought back with him from the castle that night. It is the piece of vellum that he reached down and took from that strange, cold stream running beneath it. Because it was soaked by that icy water, of course, the ink had faded to almost nothing, but after some reconstruction I was able to read most of it. It was written in Hungarian in a flowing, archaic script, and it's little more than a listing of the physical details of the land around that area, as if these details were being transcribed for some sort of real estate documentation: harmless, nothing strange.

When I think that the letters on this piece of paper may very well have been scrawled by that evil creature of legend, it makes it all seem so real to me. More real, somehow, than if I had found the wooden stake that Ascherl had taken into the castle with him. This piece of vellum is something I have with me all the time now, its very innocuousness somehow proving that every word written in that diary is true.

forest

In my mind, the Lyra Forest will always be associated with images of fire. But you can pick your awful story. There are three I sometimes tell people who don't know the forest well.

In 2007, a young woman was walking near the south ridge near French Isle and admiring a little stretch of wildflowers when she leaned in and noticed one that was obviously made of plastic, camouflaged in cleverly with the others. You'd never even notice really, out there deep in the woods. She took a cute picture of it for Facebook. One of her Facebook friends was her uncle, a police detective from Fairlis County. When he saw that thin plastic geranium in the photo snuggling between all the real ones, something in his mind clicked immediately, and he drove out there the very next day after asking his niece where exactly she'd been on the ridge. It took him an hour or so to find those wildflowers, but he did it and he pulled out that plastic one that looked so much like the others, and he rooted around in the soil below it.

See, four years before, he'd been one of the people who'd searched the house of a grain elevator operator named Dieter Forisch when the police were sure they'd found the man who'd strangled and stabbed twelve people in Fairlis County since 2004, the worst serial killer in the state's history. He would write letters to police every six months or so, taunting them, claiming he picked people totally at random. They'd never recovered a single one of the victims. They'd finally tracked Forisch down in his house; he'd committed suicide. One of the odd things in there was a little collection of mismatched plastic flowers, lying on a worktable, collected or bought from various unknown sources, even fake weeds.

That was all it had taken to ring a little bell in this detective's mind three years after that day. That had stuck with him. Buried in the soil beneath the plastic geranium in the Lyra Forest was a box of Altoids, and inside it instead of mints was a very small assemblage of what turned out to be charred human remains.

The forest was immediately closed to hikers for two weeks for the big search. Imagine dozens of police scouring thirty thousand acres of woods looking for single plastic flowers among all that beautiful foliage around them.

In the end they found six. A fake lily among some others near Moonscape Rock, a plastic wakerobin out near the Bull Terrace hills, that sort of thing. Painted just so. Each marked the site of another rusty box of Altoids. Forisch must have found the size just perfect.

All the charred remains were from different victims, just enough of them packed into mints boxes to mark special spots in the forest that he could visit whenever he liked, and stand there, and relive what he'd done to them as he'd stalked people all around the quiet county, and experience that mental rush of remembering. The whole forest was his to walk and place his flowers that almost no one would ever even notice. Six boxes in all, but that still left a lot of victims, and the thinking is they just had to stop searching at some point. The rest of the boxes are either still out there somewhere, or maybe the others just don't really exist.

Going back to 1981, there was the Cleavitt case, Barry and Vivian Cleavitt, a wealthy couple; he was an engineer, she ran a dance studio. Wealthy but troubled. He'd lost a huge amount of money in a bad investment, and she'd been denying an affair. On the tenth day of spring they went for a walk down the western run, a pretty straight six-mile shot through the trees that got almost no foot traffic that day because it was quite cold and gray and bleak. Barry Cleavitt told this story, which he never changed or recanted: They'd been walking along for some time, talking, and at one point they'd fallen quiet, as people do when they hike. It had been very windy. A couple of minutes later, he'd turned to Vivian. They had just been approaching the stream crossing at the midpoint of the western run, and she was gone. Just like that. Gone. He'd called out again and again, searched everywhere. She never turned up, ever. Vanished into the forest. He stumbled out of there near dusk. He could barely speak because his throat was so sore from yelling out for his wife.

Right away the thinking was: murder. Someone can't just vanish from someone's side like that. He'd killed her, surely. And yet, no body, no evidence. Police analysis of what remained of her footprints didn't tell them much after those windy and dry conditions. No signs of a struggle. And the strangest thing was that Barry didn't claim that they had separated at some point, or

she'd gone off after an argument or to explore something. He never flinched from his claim that she'd been beside him all that time until she simply wasn't, the sounds of her footsteps maybe stifled by the wind. So this was actually the first time the Lyra Forest had been thoroughly searched by the police, some twenty-five years before the Dieter Forisch case.

Charges were eventually brought, and the prosecution argued that Barry had killed his wife right there near the midway stream crossing, carried her out—running the risk of being spotted—put her into the car, and wrapped her body even before that to keep any hair or clothing fibers from getting anywhere. In the absence of blood or eyewitnesses, what else could have happened? Barry's lawyer was very good and in the end, there was a split jury. Barry moved all the way across the country, to Arizona, to live with his brother and disappear from the public eye. But a lot of people never stopped trying to figure out the case of Vivian Cleavitt, the woman who'd disappeared without a trace from her husband's side.

Sometime past midnight on Christmas Eve of 1986, the Tarker County Fire Department was called because a skygazer all the way in McLair spotted two trees on fire near the western run. The tops of two birches were burning against the night sky. They couldn't be gotten to for a full twenty minutes, but the fire never worked its way down from the uppermost forked branches pointing directly upward; they were very thick, and it was put out quickly. Those trees were maybe thirty feet from the midway stream crossing. Lightning strike, they figured.

October 1987, 10 p.m.: A night hiker walking the run as the endpoint of a forty-miler that had started in Gareth saw an orange glow around a slight bend in the trail and came across those same two trees ablaze again, just the tops. He couldn't get a cell signal, didn't know what to do, so he just moved as fast as he could down the run, not reaching town for another twenty-five minutes. Despite that long stretch of time, the fire never worked down those birches very far, and the uppermost forks were charred but still intact after the fire was put out.

Two freak fires striking the tops of two trees that seemed to guard the stream crossing so close to the spot where Vivian Cleavitt disappeared. They became locally famous, of course. People would stop and point up at the permanently blackened tops and take pictures. It only made sense to fashion some story tied to the disappearance. Were the trees ever analyzed? I don't know. In November of 1988, there was a false report of a third fire, but it's important to note that it wouldn't be *proven* false until several weeks later.

Before that, on November 14, five days after the faulty report that everyone assumed was true, a twelve-year-old boy and his eighteen-year-old sister happened to walk past the midway stream crossing at noon, and they saw a man sitting there, looking strange, drunk maybe. They said hello but he said nothing. They remembered he had a big milk jug beside his left arm but it was filled with something different, something dark, and the sister said she detected a whiff of gasoline, but she couldn't be sure.

That night a ranger in Gullport saw the glow of a fire and started running from a station a mile away, calling the fire in. This one was real. A man was hanging by a homemade noose from a high branch on one of the two birches near the crossing, burning brightly, nothing but a husk by the time the ranger got near him, almost tripping over the empty milk jug.

Barry Cleavitt had flown across the country and gone directly from the airport to the Lyra Forest. Nobody knew how he'd spent his time there between being seen at noon and being

found at 8:14. p.m. when he immolated himself, his body falling naturally from its perch as the flames devoured him. No note of confession, though, and no more evidence was ever found of foul play. Whether what killed him in such a weird display was remorse, fear, or some ghastly mental shade of night that cloaked his mind because of an urban legend that seemed to be calling to him, probably no one will ever know.

I know the details of the third story I sometimes tell about the forest because I was there.

I had a girlfriend, Rose. She was a little crazy. Very outdoorsy; her big fascination was delving off into places she suspected no human foot had ever trod. She liked to think she was the first person ever to touch a certain tree, or put her feet at a certain remote spot in a remote stream, a real pioneer of sorts. We were camping overnight in the Greys in January, about as far away from everyone as you can get in the entire state, and as we made our way back in the morning through some new snow, three inches or so, she thought it would be great fun to veer wildly off an unmarked side trail down a tremendous slope and bushwhack in search of unknown territory.

I followed her, slipping and sliding, until we realistically couldn't go any deeper into the woods without getting very badly lost. We were in a kind of ugly tree-choked valley, huge rocks everywhere. The slopes were quite nasty. There was truly no reason to ever go down there because the climb back up was just not worth the effort. Rose stopped finally, thank God, and said, *Here we are, maybe the only humans ever to sit on this rock*, and as we sat there I spotted a thick maze of more dense trees in the distance with a weird dark spot in the middle, and we went over to check it out.

It was a cabin. The smallest one I'd ever seen. Time and weather had gone to work on it pretty brutally. It looked unstable, every board starting to rot. The roof was caved partly in.

But of course Rose had to open the door, which was attached by one good hinge and one that fell completely off right there and then. Inside was a tiny central room with a broken wood stove in three pieces, and one other room closed off by a door. No furniture, no anything. The place smelled like spoiled fruit. It felt like the place hadn't been entered in years and years.

Rose spotted some paper on the door to what I supposed was a bedroom. It was a third of a single page from an old newspaper, nailed into the door at eye level. Someone had written over the newsprint with a lot of effort, having to retrace the letters again and again to make them legible in pencil.

The words said: CALL THE POLICE. I took the page in my fingers, trying not to crumble it by accident. It was gray and stiff, and little edge bits of it fell away. The article on the back of the page—what was left of it—was about the proposed building of an overpass near my house, and that overpass had finally been constructed nine years before.

Rose went to turn the doorknob but the cabin was so cheaply built that there wasn't one at all. The door would have swung inward freely but something was jamming it. It was rest of the newspaper, plus an old copy of *Sports Illustrated*, plus four different maps of the area. It had all been jammed underneath the door to wedge it shut. The dampness over the years had fused

that paper there more firmly. Not just paper, either, but random shavings and little daggers of wood, some of which looked like it had been whittled for just this purpose, and even an old leather wallet, which was now empty. All of it creating a very firm impediment to opening the door.

Together we threw our weight again and again against that door. It simply never gave at the bottom, but what did happen was that the years of rot splintered the whole thing until a giant chunk of it just fell inward. I kicked the rest of it in and we stepped through.

The only object in this little room was a wooden chair. There was a body in it, strapped to the chair with layer upon layer of fishing line. The body had rotted away down to the skeleton and collapsed sideways where it was, but the bones had remained intact. No clothes at all on it, not a stitch.

The body was enormous, that much was clear. Some man of great height, upwards of seven feet tall I think. In another few years, maybe, the skull would simply fall off onto the floor, or the rib cage would collapse.

The skull's eye sockets were much bigger than a normal human being's. I can't say anything else about it was grossly unusual except for the teeth. They all pointed toward the center of the mouth, and were very sharp.

We left that cabin and we made our way up the slope, exhausted and panting, and we left the Lyra Forest. And we talked about what we should do next.

Well, what I did is hike back there the very next day, alone. I clambered down the slope again, slipping and sliding. In that tiny room I started a small fire, right on the planks, and all alone I burned the skeleton, using the stray maps and pulp and wood shavings and the remains of the door as kindling.

I love the Lyra Forest, you see. I find it beautiful. There have been so many terrible things that have happened there over the years, and some that people thought happened but never really did, and I see no need to add to the cruel urban legends. I like to walk there in winter, alone, especially after a new snow falls, and listen to the way it runs into the tiny streams I've known since I was seven years old.

retaliation

My name is Duke. This is the story of what happened between me and Colin. We were business partners for a while; I won't say exactly what kind of business, but yeah, it wasn't legal, but we never killed anyone. For a while we made a lot of money, but Colin was always riding me about

this and that; he was an instigator, and he made fun of me a lot because I made the mistake of telling him I was in the hospital a couple of times up in Merriniac. I took the abuse because I needed him for the business; he had a way of making people afraid of him. Once in a while we kind of got into a shoving match. One was so bad the police had to come. That time it was because he kept calling me stupid. People have been calling me stupid all my life, but that time I lost it. And then one day I did something really bad, I admit it: I made a pass at his girlfriend, and he found out about it, and he called me and told me he was going to kill me, and that was the end of the business. Like he cared; his family was already so rich he never had to work a day in his life. He did something worse than try to kill me, though. He did something worse.

One night about three weeks after Colin threatened me, I was making a run of goods out to the sailboat. We'd bought an old junky sailboat and kept it tied up in Innsfell, way out beyond the state line on the Carga River. The goods were always safe there. So I drove out this one night in August. I got a little scared because I thought I was being followed. This pickup truck was behind me all the way down County Route 7, which is nine miles or so, and it turned when I turned, twice. And I thought, He's really going to do it. Colin's going to kill me. There's one stoplight in Innsfell, and when it turned green, I just waited a minute to see what the pickup truck behind me was going to do. And it didn't do anything. It just idled. Didn't honk at me. As soon as I moved through the light, though, it turned left. So by the time I got to the sailboat I was already on edge. The boat was always all alone, tied up at a dock at the edge of an empty property we'd bought. No one was around for almost a mile in any direction; it was just woods. I drove down the dirt access road and parked in the clearing beside the river.

As soon as I turned off the engine, I heard a thud from the back of the car. Then I heard it again. Coming from the trunk. I tensed all over, and I sat and waited. And it came again. Something was in there. I had the goods in a box in the back seat, but I ignored them for now. I got out of the car, and I left the door open, and I walked around to the back. No sound. I put my key into the trunk real slow. And when I thought I was ready, I opened the trunk all at once. And what I saw in there made me scream and scream and scream, and I turned and I ran into the woods down the access road, never stopping, and I screamed until it felt like I broke something in my throat, and the next thing I remember I was almost run over on the road by two teenagers in a Honda. They got out, and I guess I was babbling and crying and they couldn't understand me, so they just pointed me into the back seat and we drove, and finally I calmed down. About five miles down the road they pulled up at the police station, and they said the police would help me. I got out, but I didn't go in there, obviously.

I'll tell you what I saw in the trunk. I'd said too much to Colin during the time we were partners, and he used it against me. We all have irrational fears, and some people have them so bad they can't function if what they're afraid of gets too close. I knew a woman who couldn't look at a *picture* of a snake in a kid's storybook from across a room. For me, since I was real small, maybe even five or six years old, I've been afraid of something like that. I can't say the word for what it is. I can't even say it, but I can describe it. What I'm talking about is the things that live only at night and suck your blood. When I was a kid I remember this photo taken from a frame of a movie; it was that actor Christopher Lee, and his eyes were all red and his mouth was open, and you could see his fangs as he was about to bite into a woman's neck, and I cried all night when I saw that, alone in my room. And there was a movie with a thing that called itself Barlow, and his head was shaved and his eyes were like white marbles and he had claws, and when I saw him by accident I had to be taken out of school, and I didn't go back for a long time. Whenever they made me talk to a doctor, they made me talk about how much I was afraid of those things. I even had to talk about them up in Merriniac.

Colin had paid someone to hide in the trunk, and when I opened it, whoever it was, was dressed in a long black gown, like a monk, but he had blood smeared all over his face, and he opened his mouth wide and he had long sharp teeth, and he shouted something at me as he tried to get out of the trunk, *'Let me feed, let me feed,'* and he kept shouting that at me as I ran. Seeing that made something go dark in my brain, and it felt like my arms had electricity shooting up and down them, and one of the blood vessels in my eyes broke; one of the teenagers who picked me up told me it was so.

So not only did Colin scare me so bad that I almost had to go to Merriniac again, but he humiliated me—made me cry and lose the power of speech so that two high school kids had to help me, and they probably called me stupid when they drove away. So I vowed, I vowed I would get back at him. I was so sleep-deprived with the fear for a whole week after that I couldn't function normally, or eat, but when my mind was clear I began to think of a plan. I didn't want to just hurt Colin, hire someone to beat him up. That was too easy. I wanted to hurt his mind. Because that lasts. It took me months to stumble on the plan, but I didn't mind waiting.

It was the hand of God that gave me the plan, it really was. I was sitting in a bar, and I was talking to the bartender about Bandage Man, who was this guy nobody knew who you would see once a year or so if you were lucky, a guy who lived in town somewhere, and when you did see him, his head was mostly bandaged up, like he'd been injured and never healed, and he wore those big prescription sunglasses, those wraparound ones that cover half your face, and he always wore an Orioles baseball cap low over his face. Obviously he was a freak of some kind, maybe a burn victim or something, nobody knew, but this bartender said *he* knew what the story was. This bartender was new and he lived out on Arrow Road, and he said that Bandage Man lived eight houses down in a dumpy little house with rotting paint and overgrown grass. The bartender said he'd heard what the story was from the postman. Bandage Man had been on full disability all his adult life because of what his problem was. I didn't believe it when the bartender described it. Not for a second. But he wasn't lying, you see. It was true.

Bandage Man almost never left his house, but when he did, I was ready. I paid one of the guys I used to sell stuff to, a guy named Gary, to go in there and look around, and he found proof; he found some photographs. And he took one of them and he brought it back to show me. I wouldn't look at it—that was too scary—but I accepted it as proof. And that's when I knew what I could do to Colin. I didn't know Colin's fears, mind you. He was a tough guy, never talked about them, but it was worth trying what I had in mind. So I sent a letter to Bandage Man's house telling him I was going to come to him on Saturday morning with five thousand dollars and a proposition. I didn't hear back from him, but when I rang the doorbell a week later he answered. And the deal got made without me having to ever see under the bandages.

Two days after Christmas I got a call from Colin's girlfriend, that slag. She said Colin was in the ICU at Holy Cross. He'd had a massive heart attack the day before. Forty-one years old and he'd had a massive heart attack, and I got the chills because of course I knew exactly why. I just couldn't believe that what I'd planned could give Colin such a shock that it would kill him. He was a chain smoker and a little overweight, but I knew right away it was that shock, that shock I had designed that had worked perfectly. I'd spent days thinking about how it would go, how the maximum effect would be achieved. I guess it had all happened exactly like I dreamed. 911

had gotten an anonymous call that someone was unconscious at that address. Colin was in a coma, on life support.

Do you want to know what did that to Colin? Okay. Imagine it's really late, past midnight, and you've been out at a bar in town. And you go back to your house alone, because someone knew that on this night your slag girlfriend was out of town. And you go into your empty house, just wanting to sleep, and you put a case of beer on the kitchen counter, and you take off your jacket and you walk into your bedroom. It's pitch dark. And you feel around for the light for a second, and then you turn it on. And the first thing that hits your senses is that there's a man in a chair in the very middle of the room, a stranger in your house. And that first bolt of fear rips into your brain before you even know what you're looking at. And the man is *big*; he's got big hands on the arms of that chair, and he's dressed in really old musty clothes, but his face is really all you see. It's an older face, and that man has just one staring eye in the center of his forehead. He's a *cyclops*, from birth. A *real* one, not from a book about myths. And when you see that, your heart seizes up. You probably see that face all the way through your collapse to the floor, even as you scream and the lights go out inside your mind.

So that's what happened to Colin. And even though I felt great at first, it was only a few days before I started to become afraid. I had gone too far, and when Colin woke up, he wouldn't settle things; he would kill me. I was almost certain he had killed someone before. Not *paid* someone to do it; he did it himself. His friend Gary, who I hated too, who was just as much of a bully, mentioned it to me once. He said Colin had hung someone who'd taken a shot at him from a passing car, hung him in a basement in San Diego, just did that and watched the guy die. Colin was capable. He would get revenge. In a way, the thought of getting stabbed or shot or even hung wasn't as scary as what he could really do to me. He could make me see one of *those things* again, the things that I mentioned. He had the money to do almost anything to me. I was a dead man.

Colin didn't wake up in two weeks, or even a month. He stayed on life support. But he had it easier than me. I got so scared of what was going to happen to me that I started screwing up in my business dealings. I couldn't focus. I had to buy sedatives so I could sleep. I kept dreaming that I was hearing a noise inside my trunk late at night, out in the middle of nowhere, and when I went to open it, Colin was inside, but he was different. He was wearing a dark cape, and his hair had grown down over his shoulders, but it was all stringy and clotted with dirt, like he'd woken from being dead. And he lunged out at me.

After the dreams started, which was six months after Colin went into the coma, I started to have terrible headaches, and I lost a lot of weight, and for a while, three or four weeks, I couldn't go out of the house. And then at one point someone called the police on me because I smashed all the windows of some farmhouse out in the country. I was driving along in the rain I think, and the voices on the radio started to sound like they were shouting at me, and I was trying to shut it off, and the car went off the road and hit a tree. I got out and I walked to this farmhouse to keep dry, and I walked right through the front door, and there were people inside. They were scared of me. And I broke all the windows for some reason, every single one, and the people ran out of there and the police came and got me. And I was put in Sparrows Point, and I was on and off heavier sedatives for a while. They kept me in there because I had a record with that place too. They thought I was really messed up.

When I got out after a longer time than I'd ever been in one of those hospitals, I felt really strange, like I shouldn't be out of there. But they didn't let me stay. I was afraid to tell them that

I was starting to see the *things* that only lived at night and sucked people's blood when I closed my eyes, and sometimes at night when I looked out my window at the field outside, the trees looked like them to me. The branches were claws to me, and sometimes the bumps and the curves in the trees became faces. Sometimes when it was windy late at night, I could see the branches outside my window bend down and swipe at the glass, touching it, and those were claws reaching out for me.

The very first night I left Sparrows Point, I went to a motel to start living there, and I sat on the edge of the bed for hours because I kept hearing water going through the pipes all around me, and I was thinking about a bloodsucking man squeezing himself through the pipes, moving real slow, but trying to figure out which pipes went toward me and the room I was in. And waiting for me to fall asleep so he could climb out and wait in the bathroom, listening through the door for the sound of my breathing to go completely even. And then he would come in and bend down beside me, and his eyes would go from black to red, and he would sink his teeth into my neck. Blood would spurt out, so much that he would have to turn his head fast left and right to try to catch it all, but it would splash on his face, and he would smile because that's what he loved the most about killing.

I went to the library, and it was tough to read about the things because of all the pictures. I couldn't look at any of the pictures or I'd pass out. So I had to find books where there weren't any of those, and I read a lot about the beings I feared, and I found out a lot. There were stories no one talked about, and they confirmed what I had always been most scared of, which was that maybe, just maybe, they weren't always a myth. You probably don't know, for instance, about the butcher killings in Quebec in 1979 where six of the eight victims had their throats punctured by something, or the ones that happened in Ho Chi Minh City in the five years after the Vietnam War. There in that city walked a man that the people living there called the Laughing Cat. When they were investigating the murders he committed, they figured out that he was waiting under people's beds for them to go to sleep. He got into the places they lived and he waited. When the dark came, he killed them. Bites all over the people, not just their necks. They never found out who did it. They called him the Laughing Cat because he was so clever, and they couldn't solve how he got into their bedrooms.

Colin died only about six weeks after I got out of Sparrows Point. I read that. He'd been in that coma for three hundred and seventy days, and finally his body just failed, the paper said. It happened when I was feeling my weakest, as if he had planned it. I was living there in the motel room, and Gary tracked me down and he came to see me, and to ask me if I had heard about Colin. I almost didn't want to let him into the room because I knew he'd react badly to what he saw. I could sense him looking around the room and taking it in, and seeing that I had taped three crosses to the windows. And I had bought a bunch of garlic and put it near the window in the bathroom. He saw that and though he didn't say anything about it, I knew he was judging me, thinking I was crazy. We were sitting there and I was wondering why he wasn't leaving, but I was grateful he was there because the sun was going down, and when that happened sometimes I just crawled into bed and turned the TV on loud and kind of hid under the covers, and sometimes I got under the bed. So it was good to have a second person there.

But then he told me about Colin's body. If he had never told me that, I might have been okay. I might have gotten better. Somehow I knew it was coming, what he told me. He said Colin's body had disappeared for a while after he died, right from the morgue. Disappeared, and no one

really understood why, or who had taken it. The thinking was that there was some catastrophe of mismanagement and it just disappeared, but then it was there again. When he told me that, I think I must have gotten incoherent, because I remember him pushing me away from him over and over again, and finally he left the room. And I spent the night in the bathroom so I could listen to the pipes better, and be close to the one under the bathtub to make sure nothing happened. I didn't really believe it could, but my head hurt less when I was in there, and I'd pulled the TV in there and put it into the bathtub so it covered the drain. I stayed up all night, and I slept during the day. That's the way it would be from now on.

What I thought might be true about Colin obviously was, and for weeks I stayed in the room and ordered food delivered to me and thought about a plan. Time got strange and sometimes I forgot to eat, and once I even forgot to drink water for so long I passed out twice. I kept the TV in the tub to block the drain, so I could only wash myself in the sink. I ordered fifty or sixty books off the Internet, and I spent my days reading. There were so many stories about the suckers of blood, you wouldn't believe it. I had gone my *whole life* without understanding how many there really were.

I don't know how I got the courage to do what I did, but maybe it wasn't courage so much as the thought that I was going to die in that room if I didn't act. I didn't want to die there. And I could be a hero, for once in my life. It was going to be me killing Colin or him killing me, so I had a choice. I still had forty thousand dollars in the bank, and if I know one thing in life, it's that you can pay for almost anything. I had proven it many times. So I did calculations, and when I was done I spent a whole day making myself look presentable for when I went out. I had to find a guy named Chipper who would do things for pay, almost anything. He was in Newark, so I went there, and he was easy to find. He reacted real strangely to me, because I couldn't stop myself from talking about the suckers of blood, I really couldn't, so I scared him. But he agreed to do what I paid him to, even though he asked for most of the money up front. I wrote down every detail of what I needed in another motel room, and when I gave those notes to him I was surprised that it was pages and pages. He said, 'What is this, what is this?' I had written a lot of things he didn't need to know about, but writing all that got my mind away from the sounds I heard from outside the room, and inside the pipes, so I had kept writing.

I got a call from Gary three days before my final confrontation with Colin. He said that Chipper had told him what I wanted to do. Gary was apologizing; he said he had lied to me when he said that thing about Colin's body disappearing. He said he had just been trying to scare me. When he'd seen I was so freaked out with the crosses and the garlic, he'd decided to put a scare into me, sort of as revenge because he had always liked Colin, and he kind of knew I must have done something to hurt him, but it was a lie and I should stop what I was doing. And then I knew that he was protecting Colin. But I played along; I told him yes, I had lost control a bit, but I was better now. *Of course* my plan was crazy. I made him believe me and he hung up, and I called Chipper immediately and told him that if he didn't follow my instructions to the letter he would get nothing more from me, and that if he made one more call to anyone about it, I would kill him.

The timing was the most important thing about what he needed to do, the timing. I didn't know if I could trust him to get it right, but I had to take the chance. The plan was executed on the 28th of March. I spent all night pacing in my room. The phone rang the next day at noon, just when I had dictated. Chipper told me that it was all done. I had to act fast. I had only a few hours till sundown. I was more scared than I had ever been, but the thought that at sundown it would be all over gave me the strength to get in the car and drive toward Innsfell.

Even the trip out there was full of small terrors, because of the rain. The rain was so bad I had to pull over twice. They had warned about it on the radio, but I had no choice but to go out in it. It poured from first light and never stopped, and the wind was bad sometimes too. It was the remnants of some crazy weather system that had petered out to the south but was messing up the entire coastline. Terrible rain, it was. It was usually a half-hour drive out to Innsfell, but it took an hour and fifteen minutes, and I needed every second of daylight to do what needed to be done, if you could even call it that, daylight, because the sky was the color of old iron. Nothing but dark clouds, no breaks.

By the time I got to the access road on the property I had bought with Colin back in the day, it was almost completely washed out. The car spun out in the mud a few times, but luckily I didn't get stuck. And soon the river was in view, and there was the sailboat, tied up where I had left it. I hadn't seen it for almost two months. The wind had died down, but it was still rocking a little just from the force of the rain pelting the water. I got out of the car, and from the back seat I took the stake and the hammer and the saw. To keep my mind flat and calm I had begun to recite the lyrics to a hymn I had read in the Bible back at the motel. I'd read that hymn a few hundred times and committed it to memory. I'll tell you how it goes:

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God.
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.*

*See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

*His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

I went through the whole thing again and again as I splashed through the rain toward the sailboat. I was soaking wet by the time I got to it. I climbed down into the hold, and I was finally out of the awful weather. I guess the fear got so bad that I went into a kind of shock, and I felt almost like I was floating above myself. I remember thinking that there was no doubt now that I would get through what needed to be done. No one would ever forget me, or what I did. I was

going to kill a being that intended to take not just my life, but the lives of many, many other people. His thirst would never stop. It was up to me.

The coffin was in the hold, in the middle of the floor. Chipper had brought it there, through the driving rain, paid to do a difficult job, and he had done it well. No doubt he had plenty of assistance. It would have been so hard to maneuver it into the boat, and if we had been anywhere near civilization, people's houses, and the weather hadn't been so awful, no doubt it would have been too tough to do. The coffin looked incredibly heavy, even though it wasn't anything more than a pine box. There was some kind of marking on it, some symbol. They'd waited till dawn, when I'd told them they would be safe from Colin, and broken into Colin's family crypt out in Pastorine and pulled it out of there. Never again would Colin return from a nighttime feeding and crawl back in there.

My hands were shaking so bad when I went about opening the coffin that I had to take one of the pills they gave me up at Sparrows Point, and I waited for it to kick in. It took about twenty minutes. And then I picked up the stake I'd pulled up from my old neighbor's yard the month before, the stake his dog was usually tied to. And I undid the latch and I closed my eyes and I opened the lid. I said that hymn in my head one more time, all the way through, and then I opened my eyes real slow.

Colin didn't look like he used to. He didn't look like he used to. I felt like I was going to faint, and then time got very strange. I didn't move for so long that when I became aware of what was going on again, a lot more light had left the sky. It all came crashing through to me then, and I left Colin where he was and went back out into the rain, and got in the car. I'd missed it entirely. Colin wasn't the one. Do you see? There are other reasons a man might suffer a massive heart attack than getting a shock. Like massive blood loss. And there are other reasons a man would wrap his head in bandages all the time, and try to never leave his house. Because the sunlight is too painful.

The drive back to town was slow, and with the pill I took it was really tough to find Arrow Road. I only had another half hour or so before the sun went down. The house was just like how I'd seen it last, or in even worse shape. I picked the lock on the back door; it was almost falling off anyway. The sound of the rain probably drowned out the sound of me going in. I crept through the living room and down a hallway. The first door I tried was a bedroom. Bandage Man was lying there on his side, facing away from me, asleep. I held the stake and the hammer tight and said my hymn in my mind and imagined what it was going to feel like, how people would look at me differently after I had saved so many lives by killing that stalker of the dark, drinker of blood, devourer of life.

chasm

My name is Russell Green. At dawn on the morning of June 14 of this year I set off in a rented boat to a spot eleven miles north of Oymur on Russia's Lake Baikal. My destination was informally called the Pit of Night. Three years ago, a giant sinkhole formed spon-taneously at

that spot, thirty-five hundred feet below the lake's surface, making the lake even deeper in that area. The Pit of Night, less than a half mile across, could only be detected remotely as it formed, seen on computers as a nebulous disturbance it took experts months to define. Geologists believed the sinkhole may have been set off by deep drilling on the shore near Popova during construction of a plant that would make cardboard, but they couldn't be certain. Also unknown was the exact depth of the Pit of Night, because divers of course weren't able to plumb it to any extent. The water pressure became unendurable at only a thousand feet. Echo sounders, combined with the colder water temperature in that area, pointed to the possibility that the sinkhole was of a depth that may have made the spot match the deepest point of the deepest lake in the world, which is Lake Baikal itself. That would mean the bottom point was more than five thousand feet below the surface.

I had the idea to boat out to the Pit of Night as a way to unofficially end a three-week solo trip through Mongolia that I had taken on assignment from the *Tandem Region Times*, based in Ontario. The idea was to drive in from my hotel in Irkutsk and go out to the spot and have a swim just to say I did it, mark it on some interior bulletin board of minor outdoorsy accomplishments; I didn't think there would be anything out there of interest to readers, really. The rental service must have become overly impressed with my ties to the press because they were willing to give me way more boat than I needed for no extra money, a 70-foot former shrimper that had been converted into a research vessel and hadn't seen any action for a while. It was pretty decrepit at least, which was what I was used to.

The Pit of Night was a couple of miles beyond the furthest point of tourist travel on that part of the lake, so I expected to be all alone at that hour of the morning. It wasn't quite light when I set out. By the time I had to start thinking about seriously plotting my position, it was full dawn, but totally sunless and foggy. The horizon and the sky merged in a gray, ghostly haze, and it was impossible to tell where one began and the other ended. The lake was calm, just barely warm enough to have a brief swim in my thermally insulated wetsuit when I got to the right spot. I saw exactly one other boat as I went, a Viking Fivestar owned by someone rich, or one of the charter companies.

It had been more than a year since the incident that had cemented the sinkhole's nickname. I'm talking of course about the disappearance of the Bierbechler sisters, the German outdoor adventurers in their twenties who were as famous for their fashion model looks as their mountain-climbing and deep sea diving exploits, and who didn't mind trading off those looks to secure further funding for their travels. But above all else they were experienced, intelligent explorers. They blogged about crossing the Pit of Night on their way northeast in late June last year during a photography trip, and sixteen hours after they embarked from Oymur, the search for their vessel began. Yet nothing was ever found: not bodies, not the boat, not the slightest sliver of wreckage. The Bierbechler sisters had simply disappeared. That was all it took to create the beginnings of a legend about the sinkhole and what it might be hiding. It was tough to forget the last picture they took together, as they climbed aboard their boat and headed off, smiling at the camera. The likeliest scenario was that they'd gotten caught in a squall and the boat sank; Lake Baikal's sheer size made it incredibly difficult to pinpoint their route and dive for wreckage with any real precision. There were whispers than an abduction was possible; a kidnapping; piracy; but no evidence had been found of this. It remained a mystery.

Consulting my GPS, I closed in on the sinkhole right on my informal schedule, putting along quietly at 12 knots, feeling more and more alone, though God knows that was a feeling I was completely used to, doing what I did for a living. Even I, though, have my own interior tiers of solitude, and that murky, oppressive sky and the barren emptiness of Lake Baikal all around me depressed my mood. I found myself looking forward to the plane ride home.

I'm not sure exactly when I killed the boat's engine because I was more or less on the pit's centerpoint. Visually of course I saw nothing different; from my vantage point, the lake looked just the same. I sat and put my wetsuit on and snapped a couple of pictures of myself, smiling, and then I dove over the side of the boat into the cold water. It was so cold I let out a little yelp going in, but I had experienced worse.

I took a couple of leisurely laps around the boat, then treaded water for a time. Then, for posterity, I closed my eyes and let myself simply sink, my arms over my head, descending into the deep naturally, allowing myself the fantasy that I was actually lowering myself into the Pit of Night itself. The pit's gaping mouth was thirty-five hundred feet below me, unseen. But at least I could say: I gave it a chance to suck me in forever, to claim me, but it never did. Just a few seconds into my descent I reached a state of zen-like calm and was able to feel an appreciation, on an elemental level, for where I was, the awesome natural scope of it. I opened my eyes and saw only darkness.

I had just about reached my dive limit and was ready to stop myself and swim back up to the surface for a breath when my legs began to be lifted gently by a push of water from beneath me, as if a current were coming from below. The water felt no warmer or colder. My legs went up, up until I was horizontal in the dark and I could hear the low moan of a large body of water shifting, reorganizing, and I freaked out a little, frightened of what might happen to me depending on the size of that current. I began to swim upwards quickly, but the current became quickly stronger than I and it turned me completely over. I popped up above the surface in a bit of a panic, but I regained control again quickly. The surface of the lake was still calm; only when I was comfortably treading water again did it become just a little choppy where I was. I was maybe seventy-five feet from the boat and I swam toward it with some haste. There was no telling where that rush of water had gone to, or how big it had been. The only other time in my life I'd felt something like that had been when I was swimming in the Sea of Cortez and a blue whale had passed me from below; the whale wasn't more than ten feet from me. But there was nothing that size in Lake Baikal, which was strictly a freshwater lake despite its 12,000 square mile size. I'd read that the creation of the sinkhole may have created powerful vents, but I'd never read any accounts of them.

The old fishing boat rocked very gently as I grasped the ladder slung over its port side and climbed back up. I turned and looked at the spot I'd swam from; there was nothing there of any note. I'd had my adventure, and after I changed out of my wetsuit I'd head back to shore. I wondered if the Bierbechler sisters had maybe encountered the results of a vent, as some believed, and how strong it might have been. But even if they had, that might have merely wrecked their boat, but it wouldn't have swallowed it, unless whirlpools could be created over the Pit of Night. I'd heard of phenomena like that.

I entered the open cabin, changed out of my wetsuit and into a sweatshirt and jeans after toweling off. I remained in my bare feet. I took two more pictures, both of the dreary gray horizon. Visibility remained very poor. It was a little unsettling not to be able to pinpoint where the horizon truly began because of the blurred focus effect the humidity was causing out there.

At the point where the surface of the lake disappeared into nothingness so far out, I could see a slight disturbance: Very small waves were forming now, rolling in toward me. The kind of waves generated by a large craft, but I saw and heard nothing out there. It was more likely that the weather was not quite what I thought it would be. I'd had absolutely no indication that there would be the slightest meteorological disturbance in the area of the Pit; the forecast had been for no sun but certainly nothing above a 2 on the Beaufort wind scale. But the climate could be strange, and it was best I was leaving now. The boat began to rock gently. The waves seemed to double in size very quickly, but still, no hint of wind. I thought something beyond the horizon was creating those waves. I was momentarily unbalanced as the lake's icy water slapped against the boat. Looking east and west, I saw that this was a very localized disturbance, as the surface was strangely calm only one hundred yards away. I moved into the cabin to be more secure. I would start the engine as soon as the boat was stable. I peered through the portside window, stabilizing myself against a ledge in front of me. The waves were getting smaller already and the surface of the water was settling. I emerged from the cabin, closed my eyes, and listened. No engines, no horns, just the low hush of the black water.

Then came a sound I've tried to describe many times, and always felt I failed to. I've heard many sounds of whales as recorded deep under the surface of the ocean, and this was like someone had slowed a recording like that, deepened its pitch. It rose from nothing, just barely audible, and demanded that I remain perfectly still and focus to hear it throughout its duration. It reached a sustained moan that seemed to come from behind dozens of unseen stone doors separated by miles of lightless watery deep. Fifteen, twenty seconds, then gone, dissipating like mist, in every direction and no direction, though I felt the source was far beneath me, not out there somewhere on the lake. No creature in these waters could have ever made a sound that full, that echoing, and I had the terrifying thought that maybe that was what the sinkhole's creation had sounded like thousands of feet beneath the waves, and there had now been another destabilization which was opening it even further, creating a suction which would take me down forever.

By now the boat had drifted to a point I guessed was on the southern edge of the Pit of Night. I started the engine; it kicked grudgingly into life. I had the presence of mind to cue up my smartphone's voice recorder, just in case that sound came again, though I might not even hear it over the sound of the engine.

I turned the boat back toward the south, swinging around in an arc wider than I needed, so I could get a better look at my surroundings. Every direction looked the same. I had to rely on the GPS to point myself in the right one. So paranoid had I become that I cross-checked its hint with the compass on my keyring. I headed back slowly because I didn't want the sound of the engine to blot out everything else.

I was content to putt along that way for a while, replaying that sound I'd heard in my mind again and again. It was truly not different enough from things I'd heard in nature in my years of traveling to be something to be feared, but I feared it all the same. I turned and looked behind the boat, and I imagined a brief glimpse of the Bierbechler sisters standing near the stern, the color leached from their flesh by days and days beneath the lake, their location missed again and again by hopeless rescue vessels. I snapped myself out of that quickly.

I focused on the tiny GPS display so I wouldn't have to think so much, and when I was about a mile past the Pit of Night I opened up the engine more to get up to a speed I felt better about.

For about five minutes I plowed forward, hearing nothing over the engine, feeling a humid breeze created entirely by my motion. Occasional raindrops struck the window in front of me, nothing to worry about. The way ahead was foggy, unclear, but that didn't really matter now. My only concern a few minutes from now would be a boat emerging too quickly up ahead.

I'd estimate that I'd had my attention fixed totally forward for a total of eight minutes before I turned around that second time to look back. Maybe I sensed something, but I certainly hadn't heard it. About 150 yards behind me, just at the point where visibility became washed out, some enormous thing was disappearing beneath the waves. When I'd turned it had been in the act of descending, so that I only saw the end of its rapid motion, and wasn't able to accurately judge the size of what I'd seen. I could only see that it had been a dark gray mass, jagged and contoured as if a gigantic rock had poked up from below and then swiftly vanished again in reaction to outside forces. Maybe fifteen feet of it had protruded, and for no more than a couple of seconds. From the point where it sank under the waves, whitecaps rolled outwards, fairly big ones. Whatever had gone below had gone below hard and was big enough to create a tidal shockwave a little bigger than the one I'd experienced before.

I killed the motor at once without thinking, compelled to move toward the stern to get even a few feet closer to the sight. As the boat drifted, the disturbance created by the thing 150 hundred yards away settled fast, leaving just emptiness. That could only have been a whale, I thought to myself, which was impossible; they couldn't have come from a saltwater source to Lake Baikal. And it just seemed like it had been too big, the whitecaps it made too prominent. I took my camera out and pointed it at that bleak horizon, and waited. I was scared then; my hands were shaking, I remember it clearly. If nothing happened in thirty seconds, I would retreat and get the boat moving forward again, slowly maybe, on the off chance that I could snap a photograph of some amazing phenomenon.

The seconds ticked away. The water stayed undisturbed, the last of the real waves passing the boat. My eyes darted from spot to spot, searching for any irregularity on the surface of the lake. Come on, I thought, come on, *come on*, what *were* you?

The boat was rocking just a little more than normal, the water around it on all sides choppier than it had been. Then there was a terrific jolt that threw me off balance, almost as if I had struck a sandbar, and the boat's very gentle forward motion simply stopped. It wasn't moving at all suddenly, out here miles from the nearest land mass. I was freakishly anchored, held by something that wasn't letting me go forward, back, or sideways. My heart was hammering.

The thought of sending a distress signal rose immediately in my mind as I tried to imagine what had gripped the boat. I edged close to the starboard side, keeping my center of gravity very low in case of another jolt, and looked over. The lake was infuriatingly black and secretive. As if to mock me, a single gull appeared from the east and settled on the dirty stern of the boat, its tiny eyes seeming to fix right on me.

Water suddenly flew up from just beyond the stern in an erupting spray, and a giant pale hook-like object the size of a man whipped from beneath the surface of the water and curled over the edge of the boat. The gull disappeared under its bulk. The hook-thing smashed into the planks and drove deep into them, snapping them clean. As it withdrew, it ripped the boards with it and crashed through wood, fiberglass and steel, smashing a gap there, pieces of the boat splintering and flying into the lake. The entire boat tilted upwards and I grabbed the railing beside me to hold on. The visibly organic thing went below again after scraping away a massive section of

the stern away in a second and a half, and the boat settled uneasily, rocking left and right. I remember just standing there for a moment when my balance was secure, inert, numb with the kind of shock people must feel after seeing a car accident, or being told their wife had suddenly died somewhere far away.

Then my reflexes sent me back into the cabin to gun the engine even before I could survey just how bad the damage was. My only thought was to get away as fast as I could. As soon as the motor was going and the boat was moving forward I stepped away from the wheel and saw that I was not going to make it back to shore. The bow of the boat was angled dangerously high and it was cantering to the left because of the imbalance created by the damage; water was freely lapping over the stern and sloshing into the hole left by the hook-thing, more and more every second, the water weighing the back down, making it too heavy. I would eventually turn over, I thought. It was only a matter of time so I pushed the engine hard, unable to keep the boat on a straight line, having to turn it against the momentum that imbalance was generating. The engine would blow out first, probably, destroyed by the lake water.

The radio was in perfect working order. With the touch of one button I sent my GPS coordinates to the Russian Border Guard but locating an open channel through a gauntlet of static was the problem. There was a life jacket beside my head and I tore it free from its hook and got it on as I frantically tried to stabilize both the boat and myself. I was never able to connect to a live person in the Border Guard before I had to abandon the radio. My coordinates and cry of mayday would have to do. My attention was divided evenly between the way ahead and the way behind. Nothing was chasing me except time. It became difficult to even stand because the bow was cantering upward more and more. This is it, I thought, I'm going down, into the lake.

There was a horrible industrial choking sound as the engine gave. That ended in a terrifying silence. The boat carried forward with whatever momentum it had left, veering off to the east, getting me not much further toward the invisible shore. There was no point in waiting for it to go down; the incline would soon be too great for me to stay upright at all. I made my way out of the cabin in quick small maneuvers, hanging on to whatever I could. There was no time to get my wetsuit on. Fearing I was going to my death, I leapt over the side of the boat into the frigid water and watched the boat drift pathetically on, leaving splinters and shards and debris behind it. As I tread water, it got closer and closer to the disappearing point in the gray shroud all around me, and then moved into it just as it began to turn over onto its port side. And so I never saw it go fully down. It became a ghost.

I tried to get my breathing under control so as not to go into total shock. I tilted my head to the sky because the blankness up there allowed me to focus on staying calm. My only hope would be to stay sane and swim, but it would take me another two full minutes for my brain to send me the proper signal to really move. Panic had me completely. And now, to my utter horror, my sense of direction had been destroyed. All directions still looked the same under that sky. I tried to visualize the path of the boat before and after it had been struck, but was unable to calculate anything clearly. My course, useless as it would be, would be a guess, probably not even improving my chances of discovery by another boat or a rescue vessel by one percent. And so I chose to just swim away from where I believed that weirdly organic-seeming hook had emerged from the waves.

I wasn't more than thirty yards on my hopeless journey when I heard the boat being struck far beyond the fog, struck just once, hard, a low crack as if it were being split in two. An echo trailed it. After that first brutal contact, whatever had smashed into it did not initiate contact with it

again. When I heard that, I let myself drift. I am ashamed at how that broke my spirit, ashamed my survival mechanism withered so fast. The part of my brain that should have been telling me to think rationally instead told me there was something in the lake that would find me soon enough, or hypothermia would claim me in another few hours. There was no cause to struggle. My chances were as good letting myself go limp as they were fighting to cover meaningless yards.

Years ago I was taught a trick by a man who had almost died in a snowstorm on K2, a trick to remain on an even mental plane in the face of hopelessness. When there's nothing you can do but wait for help, he told me, blot out the visual. Close your eyes and keep them closed. Simplify. Become inert and sightless. And now I could feel that helping me. It was true; processing the visual all around me, which promised only a terrible end, had to be stopped. I became brutally pragmatic. Sight would not help me in this moment, it would only cause me to overreact, to panic. If I could have kept all sound out, I would have.

I heard water moving in a new way somewhere in front of me, very close. It was being displaced by something tremendous and I was pushed slowly backward by a sudden current, still limp. It sounded like a waterfall was being born from nothing, and I began to feel spatters of the water strike my face from above. My eyes were locked shut but I sensed the daylight on my face being eclipsed and the color inside my eyes went from a swamplike gray to absolute black. As the sound of something mute rising from the lake continued, the spatters became a torrent; water was descending off this gigantic thing high above me, cascading off it, and I was struck so hard by its force and volume that I went momentarily under, then bobbed back up again as the shower tapered off. I drifted further away from the centerpoint of the great disturbance, sent away by the current. My face to the sky, I clapped my hands over my eyes, relying on my lifejacket to just barely keep my afloat. I absolutely would not look.

A cracking sound came from above, maybe as far as a hundred feet above, something splintering. There was a splash off to my left, then one well behind me, and upon the third one I felt an object strike my right foot and there was a brief flash of pain. I had so profoundly taken leave of my senses that I didn't realize then that what I was feeling was debris from the boat crashing into the lake.

Whatever it was that towered above me became motionless. If it moved toward me, I would die perhaps, but I would not face my killer. Yet there was no motion, as if the thing were waiting for something, or maybe observing me, studying me. I took my hands away from my eyes and that intense interior darkness beneath the lids remained. It was still there somewhere, blotting out the ghastly sky.

It returned to the depths all at once. There was a baritone whooshing sound and then an immense slap against the surface. Water sprayed across me and then the waves engulfed me and sent me turning over and over. My arms flailed and I tried to stay up but I became helpless, lost in the rush of tide the thing's descent created. I felt myself drowning, spinning in the darkness, frozen, engulfed by my tomb—frigid, indifferent Lake Baikal, the deepest in the world. I did not wish to return to the surface again. Here, down below where everything was and would be mercifully black forever, I opened my eyes as my body rotated gently, having no idea whether I was upside down or sideways or even still in one piece.

A face emerged ten yards in front of me, floating forward just a few inches from a point of nothingness, a face unnaturally, impossibly vivid under the water, and then the rest of a body,

also white in perfect contrast to the darkness. The figure of a woman, but this was no corpse. Like a sculpture made of white soap, the woman, once visible, remained perfectly still, like she was standing on an invisible pane of glass, not floating, just standing there. Her hair stayed limp on her shoulders and where her eyes had been, where her mouth had been, there was just white smoothness. She was holding something in her pale, bony right hand. It was a camera. Then she retreated into the dark without her limbs moving an inch, as if an unseen rope around her waist were retracting, retracting. Gone back to heaven or hell or the corridors of my subconscious mind. Why not both of the sisters, why just one of them? Why had it had been Gerta, who they called the shy one, the one long tormented by dreams of dying in a plane crash?

I next remember gasping uncontrollably; I had popped up onto the surface and was coughing up blood and water, my lungs spasming painfully. The shock of my body's last desperate attempt to hold onto life forced my eyes open. I was looking directly up at the growing dot of a helicopter coming from the south. My mind and body too wrecked to think to scream or raise my arm in a signal, I just watched it. At first I was convinced that tiny engine sound so far in the distance was moving away from me. But I was wrong.

I was back in the exact same helicopter that rescued me eleven hours later as it flew low and fast over the waves of Lake Baikal, now layered in the shadows of night. The searchlight, when they turned it on two miles shy of the Pit of Night, gave me discolored glimpses of the choppy, secretive surface. No one was talking as we went into a wide low arc around the search site, the dangerous cold wind making it hard for the pilot to keep us completely steady. Everyone's focus had become quite intense. It was only just and fitting that I would be the one to first lean forward hard against the straps that secured me, and point, and tell them, *There ... there. I see it. There it is.*

highway

Years ago I went to a party all the way down in Richmond, and it went insanely late; I got out of there at a little past four in the morning. I started heading up Route 1 back toward DC. The first twenty miles or so was just a country straightaway cutting between endless woods on either side of the car. About ten minutes into the drive, I saw a man standing on the shoulder, the headlights picked him up as I went past. Just standing there, facing me. It was maybe thirty degrees out so I thought: drunk, hopefully not about to walk out onto the road. But he was miles away from the nearest anything. I kept going, trying to keep my eyes open.

A minute later, there was someone else standing on the side of the road. A woman this time. I instinctively slowed down a little as I passed her. Same position, facing me, except she was holding something in her hands, I didn't see what it was. Her clothes struck me as a little odd, very dark all the way down. I looked in the rearview mirror; she hadn't moved, didn't turn to watch me.

Neither one of these people had given any sort of sign that they needed help. So I drove on, but a little slower. I was starting to debate whether I should turn around, but God, I was so tired. I

just needed to get home or to a hotel. I started fiddling with the radio, trying to find something to keep me alert as this endless stretch of road kept unfolding with no variation.

I went another two minutes and then I saw on the shoulder a little girl, standing there like the others had been. I saw pretty clearly this time in the headlights that she had blonde hair, and in her right hand she was holding a jug, like a ceramic jug, which must have been kind of heavy for her. And now I finally slowed down and veered off onto the shoulder, looking back in the rearview mirror, and I stopped the car.

I put the flashers on and got out. It was colder than I realized and that little girl had no coat on, none of the people had. In the time it had taken me to turn off the engine, get out of the car, and walk around to the back to look down the road, the girl had left her spot. She must have gone into the woods, as if she were afraid of me.

I stood at the back of the car and I waited. The little girl would have been able to see the flashers through the dark, so there was no need for me to go into the woods. If she needed help, she would come. But she didn't. I thought I'd go into the trees just forty or fifty yards, and if there was no one, there was no one, at least I had tried.

I left my car where it was and I headed in. The sky was cracking just a little with dawn light, gray light. I could see shapes and my hand in front of my face at least, but I did get scratched by a branch on my face pretty badly. I kept turning around to make sure I could see my flashers. I was kind of angling back down the road toward where the little girl may have run to.

I was just about to give up when I saw something kind of big up ahead. It was a table, sitting in the leaves among all the barren trees, not in a clearing or anything. A table with three chairs around it, and there was a tablecloth on it. The three chairs were mismatched, and when I looked real close I could see that they were obviously handmade, very crudely. Two of them were adult-sized, one was very much smaller. They were sitting unevenly in the ground.

The tablecloth was the only thing I actually touched; in that incredibly dim gray dawn light it looked so ancient and incredibly dirty. It was cloth but paper thin, and it smelled musty, and it felt like it might crack apart. And on top of the table was a jug. A clay jug, I think. And three cups, also made of clay probably, by hand. Nothing inside them. One of them was lying on its side and it was broken, the handle was broken off. There were plates too, but only one of them was still intact.

And then in the middle, on a serving tray, or more like a cutting board, was the remains of some meal animal, something big. I was looking at its bones, its rib cage, something caught in the woods, a raccoon or ... I don't know, but the bones looked as old as everything else. And all over the tablecloth and these other objects were pine needles, dirt, stains, years and years of what the woods had done to them. And I waited, I waited for someone to come. But no one ever did.

I've never been back. I could never find that spot again.

People will say, *Oh, there's probably an explanation for what you saw. It could mean anything.* But this past winter I was riding along in the passenger's seat of a friend's car, we were up in Scranton at around midnight, and snow was falling as we drove, there was a big full moon, and she said to me, *Look at that field, it's really sticking,* and I turned my head to the right ... and that field was filled, filled in every direction for hundreds of yards with bones. The bones of animals,

every kind. The snow was falling on skulls and ribs and spines spread as far as I could see into the dark. I told my friend to stop the car, and by the time she'd hit the brakes they were all gone. The whole vision had lasted three seconds. But that was when I knew, I *knew*, that those people had been ghosts.

thrifting

Six months ago I got an invitation to a party from an old friend of mine, Eric. A nice guy, I've known him since high school, but not real well. A bit of an outsider, not a great student. I think we hung out maybe four or five times. I was a little surprised he put me on the list. It was a housewarming party for his new apartment, and in the invitation he wrote that instead of bringing food or drinks or a normal gift, he wanted everyone to stop by a thrift store and spend no more than ten dollars on a piece of art that he could put up on his bare walls. There was actually a thrift store right across the street from him to make it easy.

That was a cute idea, so I did that, I made my stop and bought the nicest thing I could find; the selection was of course pretty dreadful. I showed up at a fairly scuzzy apartment complex and Eric opened the door. It was a little one-bedroom place. He was waiting tables, had been drifting around for a while. Only about eight other people showed up to the party. Some I knew, some I didn't. It was kind of a sad affair and it didn't last too long, but almost everyone had actually been good enough to stop at a thrift store of their choice and give a shot to buying a painting or piece of art for the walls, so Eric set them all out on a card table and took a picture of them, and the next day he sent that picture to all of us with his thanks. And I figured I'd probably not see Eric again for a long time; he seemed a little lonely, but I don't know how I felt about following up on hanging out with him. We didn't have a whole lot in common. I think I was a bit put off by a neediness I sensed about him.

Two weeks later I was showing a woman at work, Nancy, some pictures on my phone of an art exhibit I'd been to in D.C. at the Hirshhorn—she was an anthropology major and heavily into art from the Bronze Age—and I was flipping through them all real quick, and she said, 'What's that?' and I told her, Oh, sorry, that's not related, that's a collection of some thrift store art pieces that were gifts to a friend of mine, and she said, 'Can I see?' She studied the photo for quite a while, and I asked her why. She said there was no reason, it was just an interesting collection.

So you can imagine my surprise when Nancy came back to my office a couple of days later wanting to know a little more. She asked me how those pieces came to be on that table, and I told her the cute story of Eric's request. She said, 'And no one coordinated these purchases, no one? It was all random?' I said yeah, we'd all talked at the party about how we'd wandered the aisles and had gotten things we just hoped were pretty in some way.

Nancy asked me to print out the photo of them all, and I did, and she began to explain things. 'All these paintings have death symbols in them,' she said. I was like, 'What are you talking about?'

She said, well, here, you have this kooky, cartoony-looking dragon, but that's Yum Cimil. Kind of a death portent god from the Maya Dresden and Madrid Codices. In one particular myth, he would set one's soul on fire. Once the soul was crying in pain from the fire, he would throw water on them. When they cried for more cold water, he started them back on fire. He repeated this over and over again till the soul was extinguished.

I said 'Jesus, I forget who brought that, but we all thought it was a cartoon dragon, we'd had a good laugh.'

Then there was an amateurish painting of a severe-looking blue owl in a tree. Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, Nancy said, it was believed that owls were harbingers of death. Even the fact that the tree was bare symbolized winter and death.

Our mutual friend Dennis had bought Eric a still life painting of an hourglass, and before Nancy could even explain that one I said 'Yeah yeah, time running out, sure, but you can kind of interpret these in different ways, right?' She said 'Yes, but these *all* have death symbols in them.'

So how about this painting of a little boy petting a dog, I said. Nancy had done her research. That's not an ordinary dog, she said. Look at the black striping on its back—that's a black-backed jackal, very specifically. She thought it was an ironic painting. Some cultures believed they were psychopomps, creatures which guided souls from the Earth into the next life.

A young beautiful woman in a red and green dress kneeling by a pond also had a terrible meaning for Nancy. Irish mythology, she said, is where the concept of the banshee comes from. They would herald the death of a family member through shrieking, or *keening* as it was called. 'But she would be hideous then,' I said, 'right?' But Nancy said no, no, look at the colors in her hair, look at that tacky shimmer effect. Medieval lore talks about that, and how a banshee could appear very lovely if she chose to.

That just left one painting to explain. It was the one I'd gotten for Eric myself. I had been trying to be very avant garde: It was just a single Japanese character in gold against a textured white background. At the party someone had said we should look up which character that was, but of course we didn't actually do that. That's the Japanese kanji symbol for death, Nancy told me. Searching my memory, I recalled that among the six of us who brought gifts, we'd gone to a total of three different thrift stores. Most of us went to the one across the street from Eric's, but not everyone.

Last Sunday, I got an email from my old friend Julia, who'd been closest to Eric over the years. He'd overdosed on sleeping pills. They found him in his bathtub. He'd been depressed for a very long time, she explained, but he'd seemed to be getting better over the last two years or so.

I haven't told anyone else about the educational session Nancy gave me. Maybe I will one day. I just got back from the funeral. Everyone from the party was there. We didn't talk a whole lot. I did look for a chance in my conversation with Julia to ask her if she knew if Eric had ever put up all that art in his apartment, and she said yeah, she'd stopped by not too long after the party

and it was all up. He was really happy his old friends had done that for him, and even though he knew it was all mismatched and strange, he wanted to keep the stuff up on the walls to remind him of where it had come from, and the good will behind it.

impound

My name is Victor Salkind. This story begins in 1995 with a burial in the forest. What I was burying on that night in June I won't tell you, because I won't be judged by who I was during that time, a scared twenty-two-year old feeling cornered and making stupid decisions. All you need to know is that it was four in the morning, I was outside a town called Lively, Missouri, thirty miles west of where I lived, and only one other person in the world knew why I was there or what I was doing. I'd picked the spot out on a map and thought, *Here, this seems like a place where no one would ever go, this is where I'm gonna do this.* After I finished the deed I was sweating, exhausted, my head was throbbing, I hadn't eaten for two days, hadn't slept for twenty-four hours, sick with worry. There I was, tamping the earth down with a shovel, praying I had done a good job, begging to God to give me the chance to get out of this and make things different.

I was about to head back through the woods about a mile to where I'd left my car beside an agricultural preserve when I heard the sound. My sense of distance and direction was corrupted by the wind and my panic and my disorientation; my first thought was that the sound came from maybe a half mile away. A tremendous splitting and cracking of wood, but not one or two trees, no, many of them, dozens maybe, snapping like firecrackers snap, all at once. I almost had a heart attack right there and then, I swear it, at age twenty-two. It went on for ten seconds, and then it ended very suddenly. I thought, *Jesus they're doing construction on something nearby,* of all places, but it just couldn't be, I was in the middle of nothingness.

Whatever it had been, I realized, did not matter. I just had to get out of there. I'd done too much already out there to suddenly improvise. So I took my shovel and I bolted. I could visualize emerging from the woods on the other end to see the police waiting for me, but I was okay. I got in my car, started the engine, and drove with trembling hands back to North Cut Road, and then on to Route 181, toward home to begin the most awful time yet: the time of waiting, always looking over my shoulder, always believing I was just moments away from being arrested or getting a call with a request that I kindly come down to the station to offer some information about something.

That time was made so much worse by the memory of that sound. I scanned the papers for any kind of news about that area, but there wasn't any. I tried to re-create the sound in my mind, down to the last detail, over and over and over again, those nine or ten seconds. I imagined trees bursting, sending splinters everywhere. If there was construction, there was construction,

I wouldn't go back. To go back meant risking being seen. I could have tried to do a loop around the forest in the car, but the map showed me it would have been so wide I wouldn't be able to learn anything. Waiting was my only option.

And yet ... like I said, I was young and dumb. And I reached a point of such paralyzing stress that I felt I was going to bust apart. So twelve nights after the burial, I went back to the woods. I filled a backpack with water and snacks and a tent to make it look like I was camping if I happened to come across anyone. If I could find just out what had caused that freaky disturbance, I wouldn't even go back to the burial site. I only needed a little peace of mind.

At 2:15 a.m. on a Sunday night I drove to Dexon and left my car in the parking lot of a Kennemore's Grocery, one bigger than the one where I was working then, back in Adelphus. That place was just another reminder of my wasted life in a backward town where seemingly everything was owned by one despicable miser everyone hated, Kirk Kennemore. Anyway, I walked one mile down Imperial Road just over the Lavelly town line, and then entered the forest from the west. I had three different maps of the area and an old compass so as not to get lost in that vacant stretch four miles across at its widest point; there wasn't even a single trail. I kept telling myself I shouldn't be there, but I kept walking. I didn't really need the flashlight, thank God; the moon was full. But I brought it anyway.

It sounds strange, but when I'd been out there two weeks before, I had been so fixated on being fast in my work and getting away that I hadn't felt any trepidation toward the woods themselves. Now, though, that my only goal was exploration, that old dim primal fear came back to me. The unknown.

I remember jumping across one tiny stream and splashing across another that was a little too wide to hop across. My chances of coming across the actual spot where the sound had originated were not great, I knew. But I figured if there was something big enough going on out there to be worried about, something that might encroach on the burial site, I'd see something, I'd come across some kind of sign.

I stopped every five minutes to check my compass. In the dark it was tough not to veer off little by little, I had to keep making adjustments. You could bend left around a deadfall or a slope that looked like it might twist an ankle and think you had corrected yourself beyond it only to find you'd screwed up far more than you thought. I have my grandfather to thank for what few outdoors skills I had.

Two miles it was until I came across the clearing, very suddenly. Stepped right into it and almost broke my foot. That's because the area was sunken, a full ten or twelve inches lower than the land around it. What was obvious from the start was that something had brought the trees down in an area about fifty yards across, but it was more than that. First of all, the trees hadn't just been cleared; they'd been flattened, entirely flattened, as if a great weight had come down and smashed them into tiny remnants and splinters, and then pressed the earth down so intensely that the ground had sunken in all around. The perimeter of the area was clean; what I mean by that was that there was no point where any kind of vehicle could have entered the area on the ground. No trails, no cleared routes, no matter how thin. Something had come from above, on a straight or near-straight vertical descent, and done all of this.

I explored the area, stepping very carefully. Every footstep came down on another patch of flattened, cracked wood, impacted branches and leaves so smoothly pressed it was like almost walking on a bumpy carpet.

My flashlight saved me from one very bad step indeed. Toward one corner of the clearing there was a deep, deep gouge in the earth, about three feet across. In the two weeks since I assumed it had happened, there had likely been some rain and it had filled in some. There was one more of these gouges, too, I'd find out, on the other side of the clearing. A hole like something heavy and big and sharp had been driven into the ground, like a giant tooth or claw. If I had sat down beside it I could have thrown my feet over the edge and I wouldn't be able to see the bottom in the dark. Only by shining the flashlight directly down into it could I see its endpoint, far below my feet.

I got down on my hands and knees and looked more closely at the timber all around. Nothing visually curious about it but it definitely had an odd smell, almost like hickory smoke, kind of autumnal, but it was entirely the wrong season to be smelling that. And there was something more to it, almost an alcohol smell underneath. Unplaceable.

Squirrels or something moved through the woods all around, each movement unnerving me a little bit more. I checked my best map with the flashlight. It made sense, that this was the place where the sound had come from.

I went even deeper into the woods, looking around for another anomaly. Only one more half mile I went, and then I simply became too scared to keep looking. For no rational reason I avoided the clearing on the way back.

I was strangely out of breath by the time I got to that tiny stream, the one I had to splash through to get to the other side. Before I started across it this time, some kind of liquid dripped down on my neck from high above. I thought it was rain at first, but then there came that smell, of hickory smoke and alcohol. I wiped the drops away and sniffed them. It was powerful, that aroma, up close. I looked up. The treetops were just a little too high for me to see anything up there but smudges against the deep, dark blue sky.

I had taken all of one step into the trickle of stream when I heard a rustling from above, way above. There was nothing unique about that sound; it was like any kind of large bird or creature moving from one treetop to the other, except whatever was up there sounded bigger than that. I waited for it to come again. It didn't.

I started walking again and broke into a jog as soon as I felt sure I wouldn't go too fast and trip over anything or run into a tree.

I came out of the woods eventually and there was the parking lot behind a hardware store behind which I'd gone in two hours before. A story for the bar sometime, I thought as I made my way back to Imperial Road, and eventually my car at Kennemore's Grocery. A story for when this disaster was decades behind me.

I read more about that area of the county in the next two weeks than I'd read about anything all my life, and the sum of it all was nothing. No reports of any disturbances in those woods, not

in the police blotter, not online—such as the internet was back in 1995. It somehow seemed like I was the only one who'd heard what I heard, and seen what I'd seen. Or if someone else had, they didn't let it affect them. Of the entire experience, the one thing that got stronger as the days went on, more vivid than even that smell, was that rustling of the trees far above my head, before I'd gotten out of the woods as fast as I could.

In the end, my paranoia about my circumstances finally consumed me. I sold off almost everything I owned and started going to my shifts at the grocery store with everything I needed to live stashed in my car, ready to blow out of town at a moment's notice. On July 7th, at about 10:30 at night, I noticed an orange light on my answering machine. The message was from a guy named Walter. He said he was feeling torn up about the deal we'd made, and he needed to talk to me.

I panicked. I drove out to Barn Top, about four miles outside of Lavelly, where I was sure I'd know no one. I stopped at a place called The Shady Corner, a cruddy sports bar by the side of Duncan Road, with a parking lot so full of potholes I left my car in the lot of some unmarked warehouse across the street in order to preserve my wobbly tires and shaky muffler. I needed to eat something, calm down, and think if there was one last way I didn't have to run. I had Walter's number in my back pocket and I sat in the bar watching baseball and eating wings and sweating over the decision, the clock ticking.

The place closed at two. At 1:50 I made the call to Walter. He told me he'd been going to church for the last few weeks. Then he'd rented a movie called *Winter Light*, one of those subtitle movies, he called it, and he'd watched it and now he couldn't stop thinking about God.

That was the end of it all. That was when I knew he was going to fold on me. I hung up two minutes before The Shady Corner closed, the only customer left in the place. I needed to break for it, to get an entirely new start. I was driving west that night, starting toward San Diego, as far away from my stifling midwestern life as I could imagine. I just wanted to play guitar in dive bars and not dream.

When I got to the parking lot across the street, my car was gone. I had that moment of total panic when I thought it had been stolen, but then I noticed these two signs about ten yards apart, very near the warehouse. No Public Parking, Violators Will Be Towed. I couldn't believe it. The warehouse was dark except for one or two lights on the upper floor. Night shift, maybe. Someone just being vindictive.

Back across the street the bartender was coming out the front door of the Shady Corner and locking it. I ran over to him without looking left and right for any cars that might be coming along, furious and panicked. He was sympathetic but not surprised. He knew that the lumber warehouse was ridiculously mean about towing; customers of the bar kept parking there. I wanted to hit something, break their windows. The bartender did know exactly where my car would have been taken; the impound lot was about three and a half miles away, down Pruitt Road. I asked him if there was any chance he could give me a lift, but he pointed to his ten-speed locked to the side of the building.

I was twenty-five miles away from the room I rented. I wasn't going to get a cab back and forth, and I wasn't about to somehow find a motel out here for four or five hours of sleep. Everything I owned was in that car. I decided to walk to the impound lot and by God, I'd sleep right outside the fence if it wasn't open. And I'd be there the second it was.

It was only a mile and a quarter or so to the turn onto Pruitt. Not a single car went by in all that time; Barn Top wasn't even a town, really. I walked right down the double yellow line, still fuming.

Pruitt cut sharply into the woods. It was winding road with no shoulder, unpopulated, No Hunting signs instead of speed limit signs. And it was dark; the tree cover was pretty thick. If I looked down at my feet I could barely see them. The crickets were loud, they wouldn't shut up.

I had a pretty good layer of sweat going when I finally saw a break in the dark up ahead, but as I got closer to it, the road bending gradually to the west, I got a little disoriented. I was looking at a massive patch of gray that grew and grew in my vision, and I suddenly felt a little bit cooler. It was fog. I must have been close to the Ponchtaw River. My visibility went down to almost nothing for a few minutes. I kept my eyes focused on one little pinprick of artificial light in the far distance; without it I would have been almost completely blind.

The road bent sharply left and continued but I had no need to follow it; I was at the impound lot. A long chainlink fence emerged in the fog, which was not as thick here. I saw the outline of the main building ahead, more of a shack. That single light I'd used as a beacon was over its door, but the place itself was totally in shadows, shut down.

I was able to read the sign on the front gate. The place was actually an auto graveyard that also happened to lease some of its acreage to the county for impound use. Kennemore's Auto Salvage. Of course. The stuff that guy owned extended everywhere.

Looking past the chain link fence, I saw that the lot was situated on an enormous field that sloped down gradually from this high point. I'd never seen anything like it. Rows and rows and rows of junked cars as far as I could see, many of them almost crushed, windows broken, tires flat, jagged lines going all the way to the horizon, disappearing into the fog, each wreck having its own sad story no one cared about.

Strangely, the gate seemed to be unlocked. I pushed on it and it budged, heavy as hell but open. And right away I saw what I could do. I could conceivably find my car somehow and maybe, if no one was really around and they hadn't booted the thing, I could drive it right out of there. I had my spare key on me. Like I said, I was twenty-two years old, full of dumb beliefs, always thinking I knew more about how things worked than I did.

I went in, slipping through the gate and pushing it back into place quickly. The area was encircled by a dirt loop so I took that, headed down the very gradual slope, just guessing at first about which direction to go; there seemed to be more land that way. I was assuming there'd be a special section for impounded cars. At first it was just acres of junk, but perfectly orderly, with each wreck having its place in one of the endless lines marching away. I felt like I was a tourist at Gettysburg or someplace like that, looking out over a huge battlefield where thousands of soldiers lay dead. Some of the cars had been beaten to a pulp. There were shattered windshields, hoods and roofs sheared away in what might have been horrific accidents.

The sheer distance I covered, the sheer enormity of that place. The fog kept what lay ahead of me always a little bit hidden. Woods sprung up again beyond the gate to my left and I saw a stretch of them ahead in the ravine I was headed for. So there was an endpoint, finally, up there

somewhere. I passed a sign on the chainlink fence that said IMPOUNDED VEHICLES with an arrow. I was headed in the right direction.

I froze suddenly when I saw an anomaly about fifty yards away, down one of the rows of cars. A shape that didn't make sense. It was a human shape, someone standing there. Just as I spotted it, it moved farther away, walking in the other direction, just beyond the reach of my vision. Instinctively I crouched where I was. Then I crabwalked close to the nearest car to me, a van with two flat tires, and I stayed there, thinking. I'd thought about the possibility of being spotted, even chased away, but I was sure I could play dumb well enough to avoid anything worse. So I stood up, and summoning my nerve, I kept going, but I weaved among the cars now, cutting between the columns for some cover, always hyperaware of the huge stretch of open land on my right side, watchful for the slightest movement.

There was no real divide between the wrecks and the six or seven rows of cars that seemed like they'd been towed here temporarily. Now I set about trying to find mine. As I moved along I bent over at the waist uncomfortably, trying to keep low.

My car was as far away from the main building as could possibly be, placed neatly in the very last row to the north, on the end of a row, just twenty yards or so from the tall fencing that bordered the woods beyond. I was truly in the armpit of the armpit of the county.

I opened my car and got in. I'd wait a few minutes to start it, keeping low and out of sight, biding my time, hoping that whoever was strange enough to be in this lot at this hour would leave. I thought I could do it, that this would actually work. I just couldn't wait too long; for all I knew that guy I'd seen had a key and could lock me in.

And now there was rain, just a little at first, a few drops hitting the windshield, a drizzle. Indecision caused the minutes to tick away. Ten. Twenty. I was so tired. And then I turned my head just so, and I saw something.

There was a man sitting in a nearby car; we were separated by only one between us. He was in the front seat, in the dark, looking straight ahead. I held my breath and slumped down fast, so I could just see out the windshield as the intermittent spits of rain began to coat it. Then I heard a car door open and close farther down. Two different people, then, at least two. At 3:30 in the morning in the farthest corner of an impound lot in the middle of nowhere.

Before I could even start to think about what to do, I sensed a splash of faint light happen beyond my windshield. I inched up a little to see through the steering wheel. Four cars down on the right, someone had turned on a pair of headlights. It lit up the fence and the small patch of grass and dirt before it. The rain looked heavier in that yellow glow than it seemed from inside my car.

I counted three silhouetted heads in three different cars to my right, all in the same row I was, the very last one to the north. Men, staring forward through their windshields.

Someone emerged from the dark out there, someone pushing an oversized wheelbarrow into the patch of weak light; two people actually, heads ducked against the drizzle. The wheelbarrow contained some tarp-covered parcel too big for it, so the men had trouble with the weight and each had control of one of the handles, coordinating carefully. They settled the wheelbarrow in

the light. The details of what they looked like evaded me; the windshield was just too wet. When I looked cautiously to my right again, two of the drivers had turned on their wipers.

Two other men were approaching the grassy stage from the left. One was wearing a parka, the other nothing at all to protect against the rain. He had thick red hair, that much I saw, and I'd say he was over fifty. As the wheelbarrow handlers stood by, the man in the parka stood over the wheelbarrow and took something out of his belt.

I had to turn on the wipers now or I'd be able to see nothing. The blades started back and forth, giving me good split second glimpses of the scene alternating with murky indistinction. It looked like a needle the man was holding in his right hand, a syringe. The red-haired man pulled on one of the corners of the tarp, exposing the wheelbarrow's contents. But I was at a bad angle, and I could only make out some misshapen lump. The man in the parka inserted the needle into some calculated spot, and then hesitated there, likely waiting for the contents of the syringe to be guided into that mass. Finally he stepped away. The red-haired man put a hand on his side and nudged him out of the sightline of those watching from their cars.

Some part of the thing in the wheelbarrow stirred. The red-haired man held onto the back of the wheelbarrow, steadying it on one side, while one of the handlers did the same with the handlebars. I could hear nothing but the rain.

I was detecting something in the air though, a noticeable change, an odor. And I cracked the driver's side window just a tiny bit. A faint hickory smoke smell, mixed with alcohol. Real faint, yeah, but unmistakable.

Suddenly the wheelbarrow rocked, despite the best efforts to keep it steady. Through the eddies of rain on the glass before me I saw something rise from it, something long and dark, a part of the whole thing. The men moved swiftly closer. With no hesitation one of the handlers had a pistol out, and he held it very close to the mass and there was a single weak crack that cut through the sound of the rain. Whatever appendage had been emerging from the wheelbarrow came back down.

There was a burst of activity as the handlers and the needle-bearer brought the tarp back up and over the thing in the wheelbarrow. Then it was being clumsily pushed away, back into the dark. The red-haired man alone remained.

And in my efforts to slowly see a little more, a little more, I had raised my head level with my steering wheel, and now when I turned to my right, the man two cars down was looking in my direction. I'd been spotted. But he nodded at me, as if he thought I was just another invited spectator.

Engines were started. More headlights came on, showing me that at least seven or eight cars had been witness to this deranged demonstration. The red-haired man began to walk up one of the columns, toward the south and out of sight. It was only then that I believed that I was certain who he was, based on half-remembered glimpses in the local paper: Kirk Kennemore.

The cars were beginning to move, bumping gently over the smooth grass. I started my engine too. I thought the safest thing for me to do was follow, then split off as soon as I got out onto the road. One by one the cars moved onto the dirt loop next to the fence and turned left, starting on a path that would slowly climb the slope toward the main building.

I joined the end of the line. It moved very slowly in the rain, five miles per hour maybe. The car ahead of me had out-of-state plates. In none of them, I don't think, was there a passenger, just a single driver always.

The main building emerged in the dark, and we were getting close to the exit. But then the line ... stopped. I kept a good distance away from the car in front of me.

Everyone just idled. My heart started to beat faster and I clenched the steering wheel hard. I was whispering under my breath, *Go, go, go*.

Here is what caused the snarl: I could see in the ambient glow of headlights that someone was going car to car, to the driver's sides, and one by one the drivers were rolling down their windows when it was their turn. This man was giving them something. And only then did they move on. I watched him as he got to the car in front of me and the window was rolled down. His hand reached in and then withdrew. The car's brake lights went off and it moved forward again.

I was next. The man, wearing a green windbreaker, moved forward and stood beside me. I rolled my window down. His hand came in. He was holding a small business card. I took it. Without giving me a second look, he turned and started to run, head down, up the slope, his job done.

The line was moving faster. The first cars had now made a right turn beyond the gate, which was being held open. I dropped the card on the passenger's seat and tried to keep up. The man holding the gate was very tall, and his was the only face I truly saw. He looked right at me and his expression told me something very scary indeed, which was that he was confused at the presence of one extra car in that line.

But then I was past him, and I had turned like the others, out onto Pruitt Road. They all sped up swiftly and so did I. I glanced in the rearview mirror and the gatekeeper hadn't budged, but now he was speaking into a walkie-talkie.

Everyone was driving in the same direction. I followed, waiting for the first turnoff that appeared, but this far out in the country, I had no idea when that would be. The car ahead of me was doing about 35 or 40. I was careful not to fall too far behind as I kept an eye on the rearview mirror. No one followed.

Pruitt wound and wound, rose and fell. Sometimes the road was straight enough that I could see that the cars had separated more and more, but everyone's direction was identical. It had to be that way.

Finally, there it was, a sign indicating a right turn up ahead. For a moment, for one moment, I considered going past it, and following the line to wherever these men were going. But I lost my nerve. I had drifted back several car lengths, and I made a very sudden turn onto something called Cherokee Turnpike, skidding a little, my junky car unable to hold the road well. And then I gunned the engine and took off. It was more or less a straightaway. I got the car up to 60, as fast as I felt safe going in the rain, and the woods flew by me on either side.

Five miles later I finally felt safe enough to pull over, in the lot of an all-night gas station. I kept the engine running though. I picked up the business card I'd tossed onto the passenger's seat

and turned on the dome light. Written by hand in blue ink were these words, and nothing more: *17 Ellis Lane. Minimum bid: \$5000.* As the rain kept falling I found my way to a highway and headed west, far, far away from whatever secret that address kept.

On January 29, 2017, more than twenty-one years after my experience at the impound lot, I was packing my house in Seattle for a move east before an eight-week tour of Europe with my new band. It was a quiet weeknight and I had put off returning calls and emails to make myself a rare meal and go through my bookshelves, keeping and discarding. I came across an old favorite paperback on songwriting that I'd gotten at a yard sale long ago and I flipped through it again, reminiscing. There was something wedged between the pages at the halfway point. It was a small business card, a little faded with age. It bore an address and a notation in blue handwriting.

I sat on my carpet in my den, lost in thought, turning the card over and over again in my hand. A remnant from an entirely different life. I'd thought about it, of course, over the decades, thought about my crisis back then too a lot. I had no reason to fear much of anything from those days now, or so it felt like, anyway. My many mistakes had, miraculously, not followed me into the second stage of my life, where I was a successful touring musician with a name a lot of people knew, more than a little money in the bank, and plenty of companionship. Almost no one knew about the troubles of my youth. Some secrets I'd kept to myself entirely. I felt I had to. To tell anyone ever about my night at the impound lot would have been to tell about its context. And that meant questions about my life in Missouri, which could conceivably have made things very difficult for me. Almost no one even knew where I had spent the years between the ages of fifteen and twenty-two.

But now, surely I was free of all that. No harm could come to me now if I simply took some time to really think about that card, and what I could finally do about it, finally. There were some facts I'd gleaned over the years without trying too hard. For one, Kirk Kennemore, the cynical and corrupt overlord of Bellmar County, had died in 2006 of liver disease. Yet a lot of his businesses still bore his name. Once in a great while I eyed the area's news online, but I'd never come across anything having much to do with the incidents I remembered. I was left to my own imagination, and in it, something had come from the sky one night outside of Lavelly, and released something into those woods, by accident or design, that was captured by someone nearby, or someone who happened to work for someone rich and powerful. Someone who saw a profit motive in going not to the police but other people, who might be willing to pay to get a closer look at, or even touch, what had been found. All conjecture on my part, of course, all of it.

Late that January night I went back online and set the business card beside my laptop. Trying not to think that everything we do on the web is tracked somehow, somewhere, I first searched for the town of Lavelly in Google Earth. It was time to walk through the forest again, virtually this time. Even that overhead view digital representation of those woods, when they first came up on my screen, made me tense up. I'd opened a real door to that past for the first time.

Nothing much had changed out there, seemed like. I scrolled left and right, zoomed in and out, and eventually I was able to locate the agricultural preserve where I'd left my car twenty-two

years ago before I walked into the woods and out of sight, carrying a shovel and something I needed to bury.

A few minutes later, I thought I had located the clearing, only because it was a small rectangle of the woods that was lighter in shade somehow than the surrounding area. A patch of woods that looked much less grown, younger, re-formed.

I took a sip of bourbon from the glass next to me and went about locating the county impound lot on Pruitt Road. Still there, by God. I dropped myself down to street view, placing myself virtually on the road, standing outside the chain link fence with the main building beyond it. On the screen it was a nice sunny day and the place looked completely harmless. And yes, it was still called Kennemore's Auto Salvage. In my mind the setting went dark again and I was watching a man speak into a walkie-talkie in the rain as he got smaller in my rearview mirror.

More bourbon, and then, sitting alone in my bedroom, I typed 17 Ellis Lane into the search bar.

I was taken quickly south and the camera settled. Ellis Lane was a long, wide-open country road with only occasional houses. 17 was what we called as kids a spook house. A two-story residence that had been abandoned and fallen into disrepair. The sky in the Google Earth pictures of this scene was anything but sunny. These photos had been collected in wintertime and there was an inch of snow on the ground. A long dirt drive led up to the place, which was a good quarter mile away from the nearest other house.

I shut off my computer. I had the resources and just a brief window of days before my schedule ramped up again. I could slip out of town without raising too many eyebrows. By one in the morning I had a course of action, and I made a call to the airlines to book a flight. It was time to solve a mystery.

Driving my rental car across the Adelphus town line on February 2, I did feel a tremor of unease about being seen here; it was possible I might be recognized by someone, maybe even just a fan who might relay my whereabouts; it had happened before back in Seattle. Back during the dark time, in the mid-nineties, my glove box had been stuffed with torn and stained maps, but now the GPS on my phone guided me easily.

I had no intention of heading into the woods. I drove directly toward Ellis Lane. I had researched past white pages with the help of a friendly librarian back in Seattle and had found only that the house was connected to the name John White until 1997, at which point it apparently no longer had an owner—or maybe it still did but that person wanted to remain anonymous. No amount of creative searching brought up the name John White in connection with the town in any meaningful way.

It was ten past two in the morning when I turned onto Ellis Lane and started to last two miles of my trip. The road was speckled occasionally with houselights, the very occasional glow in a lower window, but everyone out here was asleep. Number 17 was still there, shuttered and black. I killed my headlights and climbed the drive. My car could probably have been seen by faraway neighbors, but I parked in back, on the grass, to give myself a slightly better chance of going unnoticed. I had a crowbar, a reliable flashlight, and a simple yet I hoped effective cover story if things went bad. It was stupid to be out here, I knew. That self-destructive streak that had almost taken me down more than a few times had reemerged. But I found myself not caring.

I got out of the car, cursing myself for not wearing a heavier jacket, and slipped around the front of the house. Someone in the past had made a half-hearted attempt to board up a high window, and there was a No Trespassing sign on the front porch, whose boards looked uneven and rotting, but beyond that, the house didn't seem sealed in any serious way. Just another house in the country that no one really wanted anymore, and wasn't worth the effort to either sell or tear down, not even for its two acres of open land.

I returned to the back yard, which sloped away toward a wide empty valley bordering the woods. It occurred to me that I might have been able to walk to the impound lot on a long, long straight shot if I went that way; the direction seemed to align with it.

There was a small back porch. I climbed it and as quietly as I could, I tried to turn the cold knob on the back door. I went back to the car and slipped the crowbar out of the back seat. Truth be told, it was not my first break-in, though I hadn't done anything like this since I was twenty.

I had to turn on the flashlight and set it on the porch so I could get a little ambient glow. It took exactly two prying motions to pop that so-called lock. I nudged the door inward and picked up the flashlight again. It felt almost as cold inside as out. When I shut the door behind me I could still see my breath before my eyes, just a little.

I explored the interior of 17 Ellis Lane by flashlight. Judging by the décor of the place, it certainly seemed like there hadn't been much of a feminine or couples' presence in the house. Very little flair or ornamentation. Almost generic art on the walls. Junky, mismatched furniture. Plain wallpaper. No one had bothered to remove things like the TV set, which like everything else had a thick coating of dust on it. My footprints left visible traces in every room. Small and identifying objects seemed to have been removed, leaving behind the stuff that could have belonged to anyone behind. I opened a couple of drawers here and there; nothing. A few kitchen utensils and dishes were still here, again functional and unimaginative.

I suppose I was a different type of person, to not just be trespassing in that house in the first place, but to then climb the staircase to the upper floor. That first step I took, that's when I really began to feel the fear of being discovered by someone either inside or out. But I climbed all the same.

The story was similar up top. The bed in the larger of the two bedrooms was unmade, but again, that layer of dust. It was as if there had been an attempt by someone to move out of this place, but maybe it had been hurried and for some reason never completed. Here's what I thought: that someone still owned the house, but had just elected to never come back, to close it up but never let it go. And so it stood.

Downstairs again, I felt that I had reached a frustrating endpoint. I had learned almost nothing. Something in particular did bother me. I went back into the small dining room. Why was it noticeably colder in here, I wondered. You could feel it right away. But no draft. I shone the flashlight over the walls more carefully and it struck me that the presence of a tall thin cabinet was a little strange since it had no shelves, no shelves at all. When I stood right next to it, I heard a faint, faint whistling sound. The cabinet was easy to shove a few inches to the right. Behind it, I saw an irregularity in the wall.

When the cabinet was completely out of the way there it was, a door. But very very small, it came up only to my waist. Locked not with a knob mechanism but with a padlock. Intentionally hidden, maybe.

The padlock was fairly stout. But I felt confident in being able to make a little noise. I thought Yeah, I came a long way. I need to know. And so I took the crowbar and I hacked away at the copper plate, hoping to gouge the lock out. It took a few minutes, but I got there. There had been just a little too much age, too much mold, to keep it shut tight.

I opened the door and shone the flashlight behind it. Steps, leading down in an unusually tight space. Not a regular cellar. More like a secret place. I would have to crouch down very low just to fit through the door and onto the first step. There were only six of them, not a long way down. No handrail. It was really cold down there; I could feel that from where I stood. And I went, not more than six inches of room above my head, no more than a foot on either side of my body to maneuver. I've always been claustrophobic and those ten seconds were not pleasant.

At the bottom of the steps the floor was packed dirt, not even cement. I was fully underground now, but I was able to stand fully. My lungs stung a little; the air was stale but thick somehow, stifling, like it had been bottled up for a long time.

Ahead of me I saw by the flashlight a long corridor, really quite shockingly long and very narrow. The walls on the left and right were old, old cement, icy to the touch. Again I was going to have no more than twelve inches on either side of me if I were to proceed, which I did.

At the end of the corridor there was an L-corner, bending to the left. Around there, a second stretch appeared, just like the first. There were some objects here and there: stacks of crates filled with paper, some big bags of sand nibbled at and gouged by mice or rats, typical basement junk. I moved past them, kept going.

Up ahead was the end of this odd little maze. I played the beam of the flashlight over a big thick sheet of plastic that had been stretched from floor to ceiling across a small aperture. It was a room. There was no other exit. It was the room, or turn and leave.

I walked the last of the corridor and touched that sheet of plastic. It was fastened to the wood planking above the room with staples. I pulled it back with my free hand, shone the flashlight in. I could make out that the room was about the size of the living room upstairs, pretty big. The floor was actual cement now. There were objects everywhere. I went in.

I want to try to describe the things I saw in the order I saw them. Spartan metal racks were ranked against the far wall while the other walls were bare. On those racks lay dusty canned goods, distilled water, sacks of flour—again, chewed through—small drums of unknown stuff, then tools, and not a few guns. I don't know anything about those really, but some were obviously automatic weapons.

The next thing I became aware of was clothing near my feet. Shoes, pants, a flannel shirt, laid out in the shape of a human being, though there was no human being in them, but then I saw that there was. A skeleton, a corpse, long rotted. Strands of hair still clung to the skull, which lay with its right cheek against the cement. Beside the bones of its left hand, just six inches away, was a handgun.

Several feet farther in there was another gathering of human clothing. Another skeleton, this one face up, splayed. Its right arm was outstretched and its right index finger was still hooked through the trigger mechanism of a shotgun. Its jeans were blackened and torn around the waist and I realized that the left leg was detached from the rest of the body.

There were four bodies in there total, spread out around the big room, likely males judging by the petrified and rat-chewed clothing, all skeletons now, having been decomposed for years, decades. The other two did not have weapons on or near them, though there was one more shotgun lying at the room's center which likely belonged to one of them. The head of one of the skeletons had been crushed. This person had been wearing a t-shirt bearing the Budweiser logo. Half of it had blackened into indistinction; that part had been ripped apart.

The last body was pressed awkwardly against one wall, and ancient bloodstains were still visible there. The strange position of the body and the way the head was barely attached to the neck suggested to me that it had maybe been thrown against it, hard, violently.

The rest of what lay on the floor of the cellar was not human, though I can't prove that. Three larger bodies. These were unclothed. They too had rotted, but not in the same way, because I don't think these organisms were made of what you or I are made of, though they seemed to have made an *attempt* to be.

If you were to go to another world, and if you had the knowledge and the ability, maybe you would feel safest and strongest by trying to become like the beings you knew you were going to encounter, so that the atmosphere and the terrain would be bearable, or you could try to move among them without being noticed.

But to get that just right would be difficult. There might be a lot of trial and error, and it's possible that you might emerge on that night as a strange approximation of those beings, misshapen, badly proportioned, too weak or maybe even too strong.

Does that make sense? Because that is what I saw on the floor.

There had been a brutal struggle inside this room, a very quick one. Maybe there had been a winner and a loser, but in the end, nothing had gotten out of here, I don't think.

Turning around to leave I saw that in the wall behind me, a wooden door had been cut into the cement, even smaller than the one which led me down here. Bolted twice. When I got very close to it, it was clear to me, yes, that there was a certain odor coming from behind that door, which I believe I do not have to describe for you.

I did finally scream when I heard something move behind it, yeah, I screamed, and you know, it wasn't like when you're watching a movie on Shudder or something, no; I think if you had a recording of that scream, you'd hear its pitch go high and low and back to high, and it went on for so much longer than anyone watching a film would be able to even bear. But it did end, and when it ended I was still somehow standing on the cement in that room among all those corpses, staring at the bolted door. The sound from behind it suggested more than one thing had moved.

The things did not try to rush the door or pound on it, trying to get out. Instead what they tried to do was speak to me, not in words like you or I would use, but using the sounds they had, or that they had manufactured.

Still alive after twenty-two years, they would have to wait for someone else to come and let them out. Can I say that someone had locked them in and drawn bidders to come and take a look, and at some point greed had turned on that someone or someones ... no, I can't say any of that. I can't say the naked things on the floor first came here on the night I went into the forest to bury evidence that my mother had killed my father, or that they'd moved in the trees high above me as I stood in the woods. I don't know that some or all of them were captured somehow.

Last night, I made a long distance call to my old friend Walter. Twenty-two years between phone calls. I could almost hear 'Streets of Philadelphia' playing on the jukebox when I'd called him from The Shady Corner to try to convince him not to turn us in for what we had done. Now he's known as Brother Luther, and he lives in Spain. Eight months a year he doesn't even speak. Over the scratchy line I told him the story of my return to Missouri, and I said I saw something really bad, and I didn't know if there was any point in telling anyone, and it might hurt my life to do it. Just like back in 1995. Brother Luther told me it had taken him a decade to cleanse himself of the guilt over what we'd done, and he suggested I unburden myself. So this is that recording.

possession

My name is Elliot Lem. I attended American University for four full years, and three months before I graduated I was offered a full scholarship to graduate school at the University of Iowa, a Tarnovsky Scholarship in History, all expenses paid, plus a stipend for six months of overseas study. Two weeks before graduation, I went out drinking in D.C. to celebrate my impending trip. A little after two in the morning, I decided to walk back to the apartment I shared with some friends instead of taking a cab. I got lost cutting through an unfamiliar side street and went down a long alley to retrace my steps.

There was a woman standing in the alley, under a lamplight. She appeared completely normal, and I thought nothing of her as I passed, but she stopped me with a question. She asked me if I could show her how to hold her breath under water. I asked her what she meant, and saw then that her expression was dazed, unfocused, and despite her tasteful manner of dress she seemed dirty, her blouse stained with a black substance. As I stood there for that one moment, she brought her right hand out from behind her back; in it, she held a sword, a real metal sword. Her eyes widened, and without another word, she swung it forcefully at my leg. I screamed and tried to ward off the blow, but I couldn't. I crumpled to the cement, the sword embedded just

above my knee, as she simply walked away down the alley. My screams brought help to me quickly, but not soon enough.

The pain after my leg was treated, after my three days in the hospital, was far worse than I thought it would be. It just didn't stop, and the doctors had no firm explanation for it. My leg had to be totally immobilized, and then I was on crutches for two months, and during this time I slowly developed a dependence on Z-sominol. I thought I was fine, but then when I went off it, I couldn't deal with it. It felt like my body was screaming for it. It's not that the drug made me feel so good; it's that without it, my entire system felt shaky and hollow, like I was made out of delicate glass. It was a scary feeling, and only the Z-sominol made it go away. It made me lose interest in preparing for school, and I had a lot of insomnia.

It took months for the leg to heal. I decided to postpone going to Iowa for a semester and start instead in January. I didn't want anyone to know about this dependence I was struggling with, so rather than go back to my father's house in Pennsylvania, I rented a very small efficiency in a building where my landlord was a ninety-four-year-old woman. I didn't see much of her at all. I mostly just stayed in my room and looked through the classifieds for a job. All this time, my prescription for the Z-sominol just kept going and going, even though my leg was totally functional again and the pain was only bad one day out of every three. But the feeling of being without the drug was intolerable. I realized what was happening, and I told myself I would quit the painkillers slowly, over the course of a month or so. I worked at a call center for a little while, but I almost got fired because I missed work too much. My depression was getting pretty bad, and I was drinking, drinking a lot, alone mostly, sometimes with some college friends who were still at American. It was the only thing that killed the feeling of being without Z-sominol.

One day I saw an ad in the paper, in the Help Wanted section, which said 'Cleaning Assistant Needed,' fourteen dollars an hour, night shifts, so I applied for it, and it turned out what I would be helping to clean was crime scenes, crime scenes and places where there was some question of a biological hazard. The company consisted of just one person. His name was Peter. He was about sixty-five years old, I think, but he dyed his hair a totally artificial black—it looked awful—and he was incredibly skinny and his arms were covered with tattoos. He had been in the navy, then he was a barber for years and years, then a sports handicapper in Reno, and finally through his brother he got into cleaning crime scenes, just going around in a van when he got a call and doing this. He swore all the time; he smoked all the time; he told awful dirty jokes that he would tell in the first person, as if these situations actually happened to him; he spent most of his spare time at strip clubs, just the most hideous person. But he gave me the job and I needed it. He gave me a beeper, and I was on call basically twenty-four hours a day. I had to help him whenever he called me, six days a week, so my body clock was all over the place. I just didn't feel like going home most of the time, so I holed up somewhere mostly, drinking a lot.

The job was repulsive. We would show up after the police had left a motel room or someone's house after all the evidence had been taken away, and we cleaned up blood; we cleaned up after someone had committed suicide, or someone had been killed. The people were always gone by then, but it was unthinkable. It was the only time in my life that I saw things that followed me into my dreams the very same night. Peter only needed me twenty hours or so a week. God knows how much he had seen doing this full-time. A lot of the time, the whole thing was just going to a scene where someone had been shot, even in an alley or on the street, and just power washing a small amount of blood away, or covering the spot with chemicals. Our nights always ended with us taking the remains of what we had to throw out and driving them into the middle

of nowhere to an EPA dumpster.

Sometimes I thought I would be able to endure it all, but in the brief time I did the job, I had to help Peter clean up some bad sites. The second job I went on with him, I had to put on a protection mask and gloves, the whole thing. Peter had been told we wouldn't need that stuff for this one, but we got inside the door of this house, and we saw something red sprayed on the walls, and he swore under his breath and told me we'd have to get our gear on. When I saw that red substance on the walls, and staining a lampshade in there, I almost walked away right then. It wasn't blood, though, that we'd seen. The man in the house had committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning; he had run a gas generator inside his house as he slept to kill himself. But before he'd done this, he had for some reason gone through his refrigerator and thrown all the food all over the first floor of the house. Two jars of spaghetti sauce had been hurled against one wall. He'd dumped orange juice everywhere, and actually opened all his cans of soup and thrown them against the walls too.

Peter was always trying to get me to come out with him after work or before work. He had no friends that I knew of. I was always trying to avoid him, but to be nice one night, I went over to his house to watch a football game. We had watched about half of it, and I was almost hoping we would get a call; it was so awkward to be there. We were sitting there, and right behind my head, in the wall, I heard a scratching sound, like just one finger scratching. It scratched for ten seconds; then it stopped; then it started again, went for five or seven seconds. And Peter obviously heard it too, but all he did was immediately turn the TV volume up.

The scratching stopped for about ten minutes, and then it started again, and I said, 'What's going on with this? What do you think that is?' And Peter just kept watching the TV, and he said, 'Yeah, don't worry about that; that's just my little friend; just ignore it.' But I couldn't ignore it; it was right behind my head, and it didn't make any sense, because there was no adjacent room. So I told him he probably had a raccoon in the wall or something, but Peter said no, that wasn't it. It had been going on for six months, off and on, but it wasn't a raccoon. I asked him how he knew, and still watching the TV, without the slightest interest in the scratch, he said, 'Just watch this,' and he came across the room, and he sat on the sofa and tilted his head way back so it touched the wall, and after ten seconds, the scratching had moved suddenly to a spot right behind his head. He got up after that and went back across to his easy chair, and he said, 'Just don't let your head touch the wall, and you won't be bothered anymore.'

I was just baffled. I waited until Peter went to the bathroom, and I put my head back against the wall, and almost right away the finger scratching began again. I got up and moved three feet over to the sofa and tilted my head back so that it touched the wall, and the scratching started there too, right behind my head. Peter came back right at that second, and he was incredibly mad. He was always mad at something. This time he yelled at me not to get it started, because if it really got started it could last all night. He had no idea what the scratching could possibly be; he was just trying to ignore it. So we watched the game, and a call came in ten minutes before it finished, and we had to go out.

The call this time was to a building in Rockville. It was on a small scientific campus owned by some private research company. We were waved through a gate and up a small road to the front of a plain brick building. We saw that a window had been broken, more like blown out, on the third floor of the building. A cop took us in after telling us it would just be a blood job. He told us as we went in that there was a lot of animal research and vivisection in this building, and that a German shepherd had gotten loose during a surgical procedure, and had gotten way out

of control and had jumped to its death out the third-story window.

When we got up there, there was just one employee of the company left in the building. It was about eleven o'clock. He pointed to a dark trail of blood that began inside what looked like a very small operating room. The blood went into the hallway, very consistently, turned a corner, and then went in more or less a straight line down another hallway about fifty feet long, right into the shattered window. I walked to it and looked out. They'd had to cut the dog out of a short tree outside the building. In the extremity of its madness it had crashed through the window and fallen downwards into it, getting caught up in the branches and hanging from them. There was much more blood on the sidewalk below. We never asked what they'd been doing to that dog, or why it had gone so insane. We cleaned the place up, like we were told to.

I thought about the scratching in Peter's house a lot over the next couple of weeks. It was just so strange, and Peter started to talk about it more and more whenever we drove somewhere. He said sometimes he couldn't sleep because he could just barely hear it from his bedroom. One night as we were sitting in the van waiting for the police to come and open up an apartment building, he said to me, out of nowhere, without smiling at all, 'Oh, I bet it's that guy who drowned on our ship that time. I bet he still thinks it's my fault he went under. Well, maybe it was; you know, I still feel kinda bad about that.' Somewhere in there I was in some bar, pretty drunk, and someone next to me asked me to please stop what I was doing, and I said, 'What am I doing?' I had been scratching the top of the bar with my finger, unconsciously, again and again.

For a month or so I did the job, and then there was a stretch of two days when Peter didn't call me, and I'd decided that whenever he did I would tell him I'd had enough, I quit. On the third night, a call came to my beeper. It wasn't Peter; it was the Holiday Inn in Chantilly, and the manager and someone on the police force had been trying to reach Peter, but there was no answer, and they needed a room cleaned. I drove over to his place the next morning, because I couldn't reach him either. The van was there, parked in the driveway. I knocked, but no one came. I went around to the back porch, and I saw that the door was open back there, wide open. I stuck my head in and called out, but there wasn't any answer. I went through the kitchen and into the living room.

The wall opposite the front window had been ripped apart, the wall where that scratching was. It had been completely ripped open with long diagonal and horizontal slashes that went all over the place, gouging the paint and the drywall, creating a lot of little holes; there were about twenty of them. And there was a chainsaw sitting in the middle of the floor, which was covered in dust because of the little bits of wall that had flown out. The wall had been completely, crazily attacked. But there was no sign of Peter. I never went upstairs, though. He might have been up there, but that back door being open made me think he was gone. Almost as soon as I saw the chainsaw, I backed out of there and left. And I never found out what happened to him.

Maybe three nights after that I got totally drunk at the bar closest to my place. I got so drunk this time that it didn't even occur to me not to drive. I just lost the ability to think. I remember driving the car really slowly, driving it all over my neighborhood. I was trying to find my way home, but I was senseless; I had no idea where I was going. I drove along the shoulder for a mile or more, at a walking pace, just crawling along. I was fairly close to home, but the signs weren't making any sense to me. Eventually I got farther and farther away from where I wanted to get.

And then through the windshield I saw black gates in front of me, tall iron gates in the dark, and it had become foggy. For some reason I thought I had to go through the gates to get home, so I nudged the front of the car forward into them, and they parted. They weren't locked.

In front of me was a gravel path that I could just barely see through the fog, and so I moved the car forward. I was so drunk it took all my effort to stay on the path. To my right I saw tombstones going past me; the headlights picked them up; all of them were cut the same, marching past in long rows. The side of the car scraped a tree. I was so transfixed by the tombstones that I hadn't seen it coming. Suddenly the path went one way or the other, and I lost it—I didn't turn at all—and the nose of the car went downward, and it slid about ten feet down a tiny hill and then leveled out. I hit the brakes hard, so the car went sideways and skidded in the grass, which was wet, and then it stalled. I shut off the lights and killed the engine, and I got out. I couldn't even tell you then which cemetery I was in.

I saw some tiny lights way off in the distance, town lights, so I started walking in that direction, just totally staggering. I thought about going to sleep right there, thinking nothing was wrong with that. Then I was in the main part of the cemetery, and it was completely dark, and the fog had settled about three feet off the ground; it came up to about my waist. I stopped walking and just looked around me. I could see all these silhouettes of tombstones, marching away toward the woods. I got nervous and began to sing under my breath to make myself feel more at ease. And then I saw a shape about one hundred feet away, a shape coming toward me.

It was something in the shape of a man; I could just make it out; it was completely black. It seemed like the shape was being carried along the ground somehow, it was moving so smoothly, but this was only my imagination. Still, I froze because the image was so like one I saw as a child in a picture book showing the Flying Dutchman, a shadow with yellow eyes floating along the water beside a clipper ship, reaching its arms out on the night sea. Suddenly a bright light came on and I screamed. I thought the Flying Dutchman's eyes had leapt out at me. It was just a flashlight. The man-shape was the caretaker of the cemetery, holding a flashlight and coming to see if I was hurt. And I don't remember anything after that light went off in my eyes until I was in a jail cell.

After I sobered up a little I didn't know who to call. It was better to keep this shameful thing to myself. So I stayed the night in the tiny cell until they let me go the next day. There were two other people in there with me. One was a Latino guy who came in after I did; he slept the whole time, all through the night and into the next day. The other person in the cell introduced himself to me. His name was Maurice. He said he was twenty-five, which was my age. He had long black hair, really long, and he was as thin as Peter had been. He had a strange tattoo on his arm, half a skeleton, just half, divided vertically. He was in jail for defacing some fountain; he didn't go into it too much. It seemed like he had been in jail before; he was very careless about it. He started talking to me, and he seemed normal enough, though he didn't seem able to really laugh. When something was funny he just nodded as if he'd heard it all before. We talked about music and a little about the Civil War history of the area, which interested him a lot, and then we just slept. He couldn't get out on bail either. At seven the next morning I was let go, and Maurice shook my hand, and he invited me to a party the very next night. It was a party maybe two miles from my place.

I wound up going to that party, I guess because I was lonely. I had lost touch with my friends. I didn't want them to see me while I was getting off Z-sominol. So I went to this slummy little house at the end of a cul-de-sac in a bad neighborhood. It was a group house; there were about

six or seven people living there. And it wasn't really a party at all; there were only four or five people who didn't already live there. It wasn't anything more than them just sitting around and getting high; there wasn't even any music playing. The people who lived with Maurice were goth types, the kind of people who dressed all in black all the time. They were polite enough, but they didn't really pay any attention to me. There were two shelves full of movies I'd never heard of before, and a third shelf filled with tapes marked either 'trances' or 'group mass.'

At about midnight, Maurice told me to come upstairs. I remember that as we went I asked him what he did for a living, and he said he had a hand in some club in the city. He was never specific about anything. I was getting a weird feeling from him. It occurred to me that whenever he was asked anything about the specifics of his life he was evasive, and now that I had seen him more, I thought he must have lied when he said he was twenty-five. He looked at least five years older than that. We went into his room at the end of the hall, and all that was in there was a mattress and a writing desk and a chair—nothing else except for a bureau where his clothes were. He opened up a drawer in the bureau, and he held out a dagger, the blade curving sharply to a strange angle. He said it was for nothing in particular; he used to just mess around with it; it was designed for marking the skin without cutting it, and I looked at Maurice and I said, 'So are you a satanist or something? Is that what's going on?' And he said, 'Yes, as a matter of fact, I am. We all are, us living here; the six of us are.' I just laughed, I think, and he asked me if I was interested at all in that sort of thing. I said no.

He said I had to understand, it wasn't about hurting anyone or hurting himself. All it was, was getting on a path to recognizing and accepting the darkest aspects of living in this world, welcoming them into your life, and seeing those aspects as a natural part of existence, seeing death and all the horrors that could come for you as inevitable and understandable so that when something awful happened to you, you were prepared for it. It would have become just another side of you. He said you couldn't reach total peace in your life until you stopped being afraid of everything that's in the dark, and that's what their satanism was, for him and his friends. It meant the chance to meet the things in the dark, embrace them, and lose their fear of them so they could get on living. Most people walked around in fear of the cataclysmic events that could destroy their lives. Maurice said you had to brush up against those things intimately, and then you could lose that fear. So I said, 'How do you go about doing that?' And he just said, 'Well, we're having a gathering on Friday; why don't you come to it, just the one time?' I don't know how I answered, but I wound up leaving the house that night and actually walking home. I left my car there and staggered back to my room.

And I did go back. I talked to Maurice on the phone, and he asked me again to come, just come and pick up my car and stop in at the gathering for half an hour, because he thought I was ready to see his side of things. And I think it was loneliness again that sent me back there, but I was also a little curious. Maurice didn't seem insane, so I looked at it as a chance to peek into a corner I had never seen before. I couldn't believe it was all as innocent as Maurice said. And I could at least say I'd known people who were into this; I would know what they were like.

So on Friday night I walked back to Maurice's house, where he lived with those six other people, five guys and one girl. When I got there at ten, there were five or six more people inside. We talked for about twenty minutes about nothing in particular, and everyone seemed to not want to mention the specifics of why we were there. Then Maurice said, 'Okay, let's all go into the basement.' Down in the basement, it was completely empty. There was nothing there except for a cement floor, a water heater, and a light bulb on a chain, just a big open area. Everyone went down the stairs, and we stood there and they were all waiting for Maurice to tell them what to

do. Obviously he was the leader of the group; they all looked up to him. He must have easily been the oldest. Everyone else was between twenty-two and twenty-five or so. It was weird how every time I looked at Maurice, he seemed a little older.

He told us all to lay down in a big circle, lay down and stare at the ceiling, so we all did it; we fanned out in a ring and stared up at the ceiling, lying on the cold cement floor. He stood in the center of it. He said, 'Close your eyes,' so we did, and then he shut off the light; you could hear it and sense it. He had us lay there for a couple of minutes, completely quiet, just breathing. Then he said, 'I want you all to imagine yourself in the woods, alone in the woods, late at night. The trees are bare, no leaves left. It's winter, just like it is now. And in the trees in front of you, there are white sheets hanging from the branches every fifty feet or so, torn into ribbons. And these fragments of sheets are all more or less in a line, just waving in the wind. You're going to follow them. So imagine yourself in the woods, walking forward between them, stepping on leaves and twigs and branches. There's no color anywhere; it's all in black and white. And as you pass by the torn sheets, the wind ruffles them and they touch you as you go by. You walk and walk, and eventually there's a break in the woods, and you step out into a clearing. The clearing ends in a long hill that slopes upwards for two hundred feet. You're looking up, and at the top of that hill, there's a palace standing there against the sky, a glorious palace, with jewels embedded in the stones over the entrance, and more windows than you can count, and the palace is made of ancient but flawless brick. There must be two hundred rooms in the palace, and it's lit up with a thousand candles along the roof.'

And then Maurice told us to imagine ourselves walking up toward that palace, up the grassy hill, and crossing a drawbridge over a serene moat and entering through the tall doors. 'But once you get inside,' he said, 'something's strange, because it's not very welcoming at all. You were expecting people, revelers, but there's no one there. It's dark and kind of dusty, and there's not much of anything in the grand foyer but ornate furniture no one's used for a long time. You go up a stone flight of steps, and on the second floor it's even darker, and there are cobwebs everywhere. You see that there's one flight of stairs leading to the top level.'

And then Maurice said to us, 'Do you want to go up those stairs?' And when he asked that, the people in the room, all of them except for me, said 'yes' simultaneously. It was kind of a shock, the way they did that. Everything had been so quiet. So Maurice said, 'All right. You climb that last flight of steps, and you see that there's blood on the steps, and something smells foul when you reach the top. And at the top of the palace it's almost totally dark; you can barely see your hand in front of your face.' He asked us, 'Do you want to keep walking forward?' And everyone in the room again said 'yes' in perfect unison, except me; I was quiet.

So Maurice went on. He said, 'All around you in this hallway, there are hands on the floor, severed hands. As you walk forward, you can hear screams from behind the walls. Finally you bump into something in the dark. It's a wooden door. You can turn back now, and run away, but do you want to open it?' And everyone said 'yes' with no doubt, or any hesitation.

Maurice said, 'You open the door and you enter a tiny room. It's very hot in the room, and around you are the whispers of people begging for your help, and they're also telling you that you shouldn't be here; it's too dangerous. Fingers reach out to touch you, and though you can't see anything, you can feel the blood on their hands, touching your cheek, and some of them are screaming, and you can barely breathe, and this is the very last chance to turn back and leave the palace, because all that waits for you now is a trap door in the center of the room. If you open that door and go down through it, you will know all the secrets of the palace, even though

the people are telling you that you mustn't, you mustn't. Do you want to open that trap door? Do you want to know its secrets?' And one last time everyone in the basement said 'yes,' but louder this time, almost shouting it, all together.

Maurice was quiet for a bit after that. We just lay there in the dark for a couple of minutes, keeping our eyes closed. Then I heard this sound, like a hissing, but much softer, and I could hear Maurice moving, and after a bit I flinched because I felt a tickle on my neck, and then a long piece of what felt like velvet ribbon drawn across my right hand. Then it went across my neck. Maurice was dragging a heavy ribbon, and I assumed he was making it snake very slowly over every person in the room, because the soft hissing would be interrupted for just a second and then continue. He dragged it across my chest, and then my legs, and then it was gone. I heard it skating across the floor, and I imagined the next person was experiencing the feel of the ribbon.

Then, like a circuit breaker had snapped inside my mind, I went unconscious; that's the last thing I knew of. I didn't feel physically strange before it happened. All I know is that I went out all of a sudden, almost like a hypnotist had forced me out. When I woke up it was morning, and I was lying on the sofa in the main room downstairs. I was face up, still in my clothes, and it was just past dawn. And obviously I wondered what had happened to me. I hadn't drunk enough to pass out or black out; everything had just gone out at some point. I'd slept for about five or six hours. I sat up and I felt really groggy, like I had a fever, and I just walked over to the front door and I walked out, and I got in my car and I drove home.

On the way driving, I saw something strange about my wrists. The inside of my right wrist had a small abrasion on it, a horizontal one, that ran about halfway across, almost as if I had been burned. And on my left wrist, in the same place, a half inch below the beginning of my palm, was the smallest hint of the same thing, maybe a centimeter across, but definitely an abrasion. My first thought was that something had at some point been tied around my wrists. I went home and I slept until almost four in the afternoon. When I woke up I didn't feel groggy anymore. I was back to normal, except for a craving to drink.

Maurice called me that night around eleven, and he asked me what I thought of the little gathering. I said I wasn't sure how much of it I missed. He said they'd found me passed out when they'd turned the lights on again about an hour after they started, and they were a little worried; they didn't know why I had blacked out. I didn't mention the marks on my wrists, but I did ask him what happened that last half hour or so, what they had all done there in the dark. And he said it had just been some kind of meditation and visualization ritual that they'd all gone through before.

The main reason he was calling was that he wanted to invite me the next night to something called a proxy crawl. I asked him what that was, and he said he couldn't really explain it to me, but it was something the group did every few months, a little bit more intensely each time, and anyone new should really experience it for themselves. I didn't know what to say. I had no interest in going back there; the thought of it disturbed me. But my depression was doing something to me. It was slowly making it seem like anything that happened to me was all right as long as I didn't have a say in it. As long as all my decisions were someone else's, I could get through the day in one piece. The only real enemy I had was being alone in my room. And then, as if knowing what I really needed, Maurice said he could get me more Z-sominol. I figured as long as I stayed alert around these people I would be fine. Maurice said he wanted to pick me up at nine the next night. I don't think I specifically said yes or no. I think he just assumed an answer for me.

My fever came back when I went to bed around midnight. I could feel it, and it got bad over the space of an hour; I really did have something. I got up and went to take a hot shower, which usually made me feel better when I was getting really sick. I took off my clothes and I looked in the mirror, and right away I saw something on my neck. On the right side of it and on the left side of it, very low, just above my chest, were two more abrasions, one of them much bigger than the other, like burn marks again, horizontal, and I turned around and looked at my back in the mirror, but there was nothing on the back of my neck.

I took my shower and climbed back into bed, but I couldn't sleep. It got later and later, and at one point for no reason I could really understand, I got scared. I got scared of the dark in the room, and everything outside of it. I began to wonder what was under my bed, what was inside my closet. I felt vulnerable, and I covered myself deeper with my blankets, but it didn't work. After ten minutes of thinking about this, I was terrified to be in my room, where anything could get at me. Part of this paranoia was brought on by the fever, and my rising temperature, but not all of it. I couldn't explain the rest, but it was palpable. The room was too still, and too quiet, so I decided to break it, to say something out loud. I couldn't think of what, so out of nowhere, not really knowing why I chose these words, I said, 'Satan, show yourself!' very loudly, I think hoping that saying something completely absurd would end it, would get me out of the trance I was in. It was a bizarre command, a bizarre challenge. But I didn't feel better after I said that, and almost immediately something happened.

I tensed up, and I felt like I suddenly couldn't move at all. My arms and my legs felt locked. I couldn't even move my head from side to side. And in the corner of the room, at about knee height, a small black mass evolved from nothing. Then it was hanging in the air, and then it was coming toward me, very slowly through the dark. I wanted to jump up and run, but I couldn't move. I was petrified, both with fear and with some kind of physical failure that rendered my limbs useless. I was lying on my left side, and I couldn't move. The black mass of gauze came forward; it floated toward my face, getting bigger and bigger, just a solid field of total darkness about a foot on each side. I was sweating; my heart was pounding. It got to within six inches of my face, then to about three inches, completely obliterating my view of anything but itself. Then it stopped, and I was left looking into this entirely featureless patch of the darkest night, something so absolute and awful I was afraid to close my eyes before it. And then it withdrew, just as slowly as it had come for me. It went back toward the corner of the room. It took maybe two minutes to fade, and then it just devolved into nothing again. I lay there in bed for another two hours. It took me a full hour just to calm down. I didn't know what was happening to me. I was able to move again, at least.

I had a couple of job interviews the next day. I got about two hours of sleep. I didn't get either one of the jobs, but it was a good thing, the interviews, doing something normal. At about dusk, though, I got very low. I had three beers, I turned the TV on full blast and turned all the lights on, and I watched sitcoms. Maurice was supposed to pick me up at about nine, but nine came and went, then ten, then eleven, and still no sign of him. I called the house; there was no answer. I desperately wanted more to drink, but I forced myself to stop where I was. Finally at eleven thirty Maurice pulled up outside and honked his horn, and I went out and got into his Chevy. He was different; everything about him seemed different. There was no real friendliness in him suddenly. He didn't say where we were going or how long it would take to get there.

So we were driving, and I finally asked, 'Did anyone but you touch me the other night, when I passed out?' He said no, and I showed him my wrists; I pointed out the abrasions. He just looked

at them for a second and went back to staring through the windshield. He claimed he didn't know what could have caused them. He asked me what was the last thing I remembered before I blacked out, and I told him it was the feeling of that ribbon moving over my chest and my arms and my hands, and he frowned, and he said, 'It felt like a ribbon to you?' And I said, 'Yeah, what was it?' And he said it had been a string of beads, a very heavy string of beads, about eight feet long. There was no ribbon, and nothing like it. I said I had heard something that certainly wasn't beads moving along the cement floor, and he just shook his head, and then he said that reminded him of something; he thought that meant something. In his reading from some time ago, he'd come across that phenomenon, but he couldn't remember where or what it specifically meant.

Then he started to talk some more, as we were going down this country road with the high beams on. He shook out five Z-sominol pills from a Ziploc bag and gave them to me. He began speaking about how satanism had changed him over the past three years since he had gotten into it, how it was getting easier and easier for him to keep one foot in the normal world, keep up a mask for his friends and his parents and the people he saw at his job, and at the same time be somewhere else entirely, all day and all night, even when he was asleep. He had achieved perfect astral projection, for example, for an hour at a time. He could do it awake, in the middle of the day, in conversation even.

We drove for fifteen more minutes, deeper and deeper into the country, and there were woods on either side of us at one point, thin woods, and I recognized where we were. We were on a one-lane, unmarked blacktop in a state park. I'd been somewhere around there before, hiking when I was a teenager. It was just woods for a couple of miles in either direction. We went over a little wooden bridge over a creek, and Maurice pulled over just after it, on a wide patch of dirt, and he stopped the car and he smiled for the first time that night. This is where we were meeting everyone. I got out. It was really cold, and I looked around, and I followed Maurice onto a trail, and we started walking deeper into the woods.

Just being there made me uneasy, because the last time I had been somewhere this remote, at night, I had suffered my broken leg. I had these very bad associations with it. We could see everything; our night vision got adjusted very quickly, and there were absolutely no artificial lights—house lights, neighborhood lights—on for miles, so it was pretty clear. We walked for about five minutes, and the woods got a little thicker, and someone was up ahead. It was a guy named Curtis, who I'd met at Maurice's house. He nodded at me, and then a girl named Paula was there, and we kept walking. And then I saw something unusual about the trees up ahead. There were strips of white sheets hanging from the branches. Then more and more of them, pretty much marking our way through the woods, just bed sheets, torn up, hanging there, fluttering in the wind. No one was saying anything. Maurice was right beside me, and I asked him why the sheets were there, and he said casually it was all part of the atmosphere he wanted. That when we die, they wrap our bodies in one, and he just stared at the ground as we walked, and we kept moving.

We caught up with two other people. I couldn't actually see their faces too well. We kept walking. Someone had ripped up sheets and hung them for several hundred yards. They were hanging every thirty feet or so. After a minute I realized that the others were walking about as fast as I was, but they were lagging behind me; I was actually in front. Even Maurice had dropped a couple of steps back. When I stopped for a second to let him catch up, he stopped too, and he said, 'No, no, you're going first; this is your crawl,' and I said to him, 'What does that mean?' And he said, 'We're following you. Just keep walking and everything will be obvious in

just a couple of minutes.' And that's when I got really scared.

The others had stopped, and they were looking at me. And I said, 'Well, tell me where we're going,' and Maurice said, 'We're going to the palace, just like the other night. Only tonight, you're really going to take us there. It has to be you.' I said, 'Why me?' And he didn't say anything for a second; then he just said, 'If you walk ahead, just a couple of more minutes, the palace will be waiting for you.' And the others didn't say anything; they were waiting for me to go forward. I didn't know what else to do. There was only one trail; the woods were thick; there was only one way to go. So I went forward, and I was thinking about how to get away from these insane people. I thought it was very possible they were going to try to hurt me.

In another thirty seconds or so I saw that the trail was ending up ahead. I could see grass there; the woods were ending entirely. I heard Maurice say, 'Stop,' and I turned around, and they had all stopped, but he told me they would just wait for me to step into the clearing and see the palace. I got to see it first tonight, and I would lead them in, and they would join me. It was just a few steps more, he said, and when I saw it, I would know how great it was to behold it. Then we would all go in and celebrate. So I walked ahead, and the trees ended and then I was in a clearing. There was a gently sloping hill in front of me; it rose up to its highest point about a hundred yards away, and I looked up toward the top of the hill, and there was a house, totally darkened. And it was almost nothing more than wreckage. It had been burned, destroyed, probably years before. The windows had been boarded up, and even in the dark from a hundred yards away I could see holes in the side of it. The porch had been ripped apart, the front door was missing entirely, and the one window that was left on the front was broken. It was a condemned house, sitting in the clearing at the top of the hill. Even the paint had rotted away. And I knew right then, without a doubt, that something terrible was going to happen to me if I went up that hill. I was going to be harmed in some way, something they had conceived of nights before.

I heard the footsteps of the others in the leaves well behind me. And I began to run. I ran to my right, as fast as I could, up the hill, over the field, going past the house on a diagonal, and over the top of the hill the field sloped down again, and in the distance I saw a radio tower, beyond more woods. It was a two hundred-yard run just to get to the woods, and I was breathing hard. I had a sharp pain in my chest; I didn't even know if I could make it there. I turned my head to look back for a split second, and they were all following me. They were running too, and I was way ahead of them, but I could see all of them were coming. And if I fell down, I thought, I would die. So I never looked back, and I left the field and I broke into the woods. It felt like I was having a heart attack, that cold air rushing into my lungs, and there was no trail, so I was running through the trees, and all of a sudden the trees broke again and I was suddenly coming out between two houses in a neighborhood somewhere. I ran through a back yard and came out in a cul-de-sac, and I fell right there on the pavement. I couldn't run any longer; I didn't care what happened.

I lay there for ten minutes, never looking back. Finally I got up, and I had no idea where I was. I walked down the street, taking every turn that came along, too shaken to establish any sense of direction. All I wanted was to stumble across a main road. There was a Seven-Eleven right on the main road, facing the entrance to the community, and cars were going past. I went into the Seven-Eleven, and I bought something so I could have change for the pay phone. I called a cab, and I waited inside the store until it came. I think I looked through magazines, but I had no sense of what I was looking at. I was still in shock. When the cab showed up, I took it not back to my room, but to the Holiday Inn a mile away from it. I checked in. I got a room; I put it on my

credit card. I went upstairs and fell asleep right away. I opened the curtains all the way before I did, so I would wake up with lots of light falling on me.

I didn't hear anything from anyone for the next three days, which I spent just existing, doing small things. I was sitting in a coffeehouse reading the newspaper when I came across a little blurb in the local section that said a man named Maurice Aikens, thirty-three years old, from Potomac, Maryland, was killed in a car accident the night before, a one-car accident. He hit a deer and he ran off the road, in Manassas. Maurice was actually dead, two nights after being in the woods, and it wasn't some transcendence. He hadn't sacrificed himself; he'd hit a deer driving along at four o'clock in the morning, and that was it. What it felt like, though, was one more piece of something closing in on me, something coming for me, one step after another. It felt like a chain was being pulled, and I was attached to it, and I didn't know where it was taking me. I considered checking myself into a hospital. I needed to be protected, I thought, and if the only way I could do it was to drive somewhere and commit myself, then maybe it was time. All I had otherwise was drinking, starting to drink at about noon, leaving myself two good clear hours in the morning before I basically checked out of life entirely for the rest of the day, every day. I wasn't going to get a job; I would just be evicted eventually, have nowhere to go. So the next day I thought about it more, and I headed out and walked until my feet hurt. I was walking and trying to keep myself away from drinking, getting farther and farther out, mile after mile until I didn't know really where I was.

I was deep in the suburbs, and it started to rain. I went into an anonymous-looking sports bar in a strip mall, hoping just to stay dry, and hoping I could get something to eat there. There was almost no one inside, nothing on the TV sets, nobody playing pool, no waitress working. There was just a guy behind the bar, so I sat there and ordered a sandwich, and when it came I went over to a booth in a corner and sat there eating it. From where I was sitting I could see the booth opposite the aisle, and there was a priest sitting there, just sitting, not eating or drinking anything. He was maybe forty years old. His hair was going gray, and he didn't have much of it; it was really short on the sides, almost shaved, and he was very muscular, though I couldn't tell it then. I couldn't see his arms because he was wearing the clothes of a priest: long sleeves, collar, and black slacks. And he had sort of small eyes; they seemed unusually small, really set into the sockets. They were brown, I think. Even when he smiled his eyes didn't smile much; you couldn't tell his changes of expression from them.

I looked over at him from time to time, and he finally looked at me, and he shrugged and he said, 'I've been stood up, looks like.' And I said something pointless, like "That's too bad," and then he got up and he came over to my booth, and he just sat across from me, just like that. When he got up I saw how tall he was; he was taller than I was, taller than 6'2". He introduced himself to me as Father Hall. He said he was expecting a friend, but the friend was an hour and a half late, and he said he thought I looked ill, and I told him yes, I had some kind of a fever, and I was very tired from walking. I remember now he never shook my hand, which was actually a relief to me. He asked me how long I had been out walking, since I was so drenched—the rain had really come down on me—and I said it had been at least two hours. He said he wished he could give me a ride, but he was on foot himself and he would have left by now, except for the rain. So we talked for a while as I ate.

He said he noticed that I seemed very down, and I told him it had been a rough couple of days,

and a rough couple of months, and somehow we got to talking about the attack and how I hadn't gone back to my father's house and I had no job, and I told him about working for Peter, and getting involved with some people who turned out to be bad for me. He asked me a lot of questions about myself, and he really wanted to know how my friends had turned out not to be friends. So I found myself telling him the entire story, everything from my experience with the cleaning job to the strange scratching sounds in Peter's house, to my meeting Maurice, to the marks on my wrists and on my neck, to the way they'd taken me into the woods. He was so easy to talk to; he accepted everything; he didn't blink when I mentioned satanism and how I had been sucked into Maurice's world. It all came out; I didn't leave anything out except for how I had been fighting the painkillers and now alcohol.

We sat there for more than an hour, and at some point when I was talking about how I'd found out about Maurice's death, I realized I was crying. And Father Hall didn't do the obvious thing, which was talk about God. He never once mentioned God, or Christ. He didn't touch me, didn't comfort me. He waited till I had regained myself, and then he said, 'I think I should tell you, you might be in a lot of danger still.' I figured he was talking about Maurice's friends, but he meant my mental state. He asked me if I had thought about checking into a hospital, so of course I told him yes, but that I was afraid to do it, because who knew what they would discover about me when I went in. Maybe I wouldn't be able to get out for a while; maybe I would be messing up my chance to get to Iowa, away from all this, to school.

He invited me to meet him the next day. He said if I wanted to talk more, he could give me a couple of hours in the afternoon. He wanted to talk about ways just to get me back on my feet again and thinking clearly, and he promised they would have nothing to do with the church. He asked me to write down an address, and I did and I stuck it in my pocket. He said to meet him there the next day at around three if I wanted, and I said I'd try. And he got up and left, again without shaking my hand. I didn't actually even see him leave; he moved past the table, and I stared into my beer. I didn't feel like getting up, or moving at all; I only wanted to sit and let time go by. It had been such a relief to tell these things to someone like a priest, even though I'd never been religious, that I just wanted to sit and be still and calm. So it was almost dark when I left. I didn't meet Father Hall the next day though; I didn't go. I suddenly felt a little ashamed at having cried in front of him. Some time had passed, and I told myself it wasn't necessary, that I'd had my catharsis, a chance meeting with a priest, and I had basically made my confession. So I didn't go to meet him, not then. Instead I went that afternoon to the movies. I wasn't going to be able to pay my rent at the end of the month, it looked like; finally I was going to run out of money. But it seemed like a small issue, and whatever happened, happened.

On that Friday night, I began my court sentence for my drunk driving conviction. I'd plead guilty, no lawyer, no anything. My court sentence was to work as a night watchman at a high school a few miles away. I would have to do this every night until I got a real job, every night from ten to five in the morning, six days a week. There had been a lot of vandalism recently at the school, Ellington High School, some break-ins, so they figured this would be good community service. I was let into the school by a janitor and let out by a different one. I had no keys; I had no uniform, no weapon or anything. It was my job only to stay inside the school, make occasional rounds of the hallways and the classrooms, and call the police if I saw anything suspicious, nothing more. I suppose I could have gone right to sleep and no one would have known, but instead I read all night. It was tough to stay awake at first, but I walked around a lot too, and even shot baskets in the gym. The rooms were all locked. I couldn't go in anywhere;

almost nowhere was open to me except the gym and the cafeteria, where I sat when I sat. That was my work, seven hours every night, walking through the halls of this big two-story high school. Half of the hallways were completely darkened; there weren't even any dull red emergency lights. I just tried to stay awake as best I could. I never saw or heard any vandals. The crime wave had ended, I guess.

It was five days after I met Father Hall that something happened. I was in the gym; it was about one thirty in the morning. I was sitting in a chair near the big picture window that ran the length of the wall, looking out on the parking lot, which was completely empty. There was only one light on, back in the locker room. This and the night lights. I was basically in the dark, except I had a flashlight that I read by. I was reading a J.G. Ballard book. And I heard a sound like a door closing, with an echo, but very far away, which made me think at first that it came from the boiler room, which was at the basement level, which you got to by opening a door inside the locker room, going down a little hallway, and then going down a short flight of steps.

So I got up—this is what I was supposed to do—and the sound didn't come again. But I thought I'd check out the boiler room. I'd been there once before. The janitor kept the door to the steps open at night in case something happened with the heat or something, so I could check on it. I went through the door to the locker room and down the little hallway, where the janitor had created a little office consisting of a card table and a shelf he'd screwed into the wall. I went past that and down the steps. The basement, the boiler room, was pretty big; it was a maze of pipes and machinery. I didn't even know where the light switches were, so I just navigated by flashlight, giving the entire place a quick once-over. I couldn't imagine anyone getting into the school this way, of course, but I had time to check everything, so I did.

The end of the basement was about fifteen feet ahead of me when I saw the thing by the light of the flashlight. There was a chair set between two tall water heaters, a chair set against the far cement wall. There was something in the chair, sitting in it. I took a few steps closer and I stopped, looking at it with the flashlight. The thing was wrapped, swaddled, in a black sort of cloak, all over its body, down over where the feet of a person would be. But this wasn't a human being. It was twice as big, enormous. It had recognizable arms, which were on the chair's arms. It was sitting up, and I saw its hands, which were three times the size of normal human hands. The fingers were gigantic and doughy, a pale white color, and there weren't enough of them. There were three or four on each hand. There weren't any fingernails either. The hands were perfectly still; the entire body of the thing was perfectly still. The head inside the cloak was overly large, and it was almost a featureless lump. The nose was squashed flat; the mouth ran horizontally too far to each side; there was just a slit, no lips, a slit running from one side of the head to another. The thing's face was gray, a light gray. The texture of the skin made it seem like it was made up of thousands of specks of gray sand. It had huge eyes, all one color, a dark red I think. I'd say the eyes were the size of saucers. It looked like it was gazing at the ceiling, but it didn't have any pupils. The eyes were just a mass of dark red.

I kept the flashlight trained on it for more than a minute, and I could eventually detect movement. It was breathing, but it wasn't making a sound, and it wasn't looking at me. Its head was cocked back to the ceiling, like it was near death, comatose. I couldn't see its upper torso moving because of the cloak. Maybe I only sensed it was breathing. It just sat there, in the dark, and immediately it was so bizarre because I felt no threat from it at all. I knew somehow that it wasn't there to hurt me. It didn't seem capable of any movement. But I backed away, just a little at a time, all the way back to the steps, and only then did I turn and go slowly up them and back to the gym, and I sat back in my chair and I just stayed there for an hour, watching the outer

door, which I had closed on my way out. I don't even remember what I was thinking, but I was strangely rational; I know that much. Even though I was shaking, I was rational. I thought that I would sit there for as long as it took to be able to go back down there and look again. I thought the chances were good that it was all in my head, which was almost a relief. It meant I was going chemically mad, and I could be helped; I would go to the hospital the next day if I went back down there and the thing was gone.

It was about an hour, and then I went back. I went through the door, down the hallway, down the steps, and from all the way across the boiler room I shone the flashlight against the back wall. And sure enough the chair was still there, but the thing was gone. I went closer and there was a smell now. I thought at the time it was as if an apple had burned and charred, and been made toxic; that's what it smelled like. The ceiling of the boiler room was just those tagboard squares in a big grid, like every ceiling in every school everywhere; you could lift them up just by pushing a hand on one. I saw that the square directly above the chair was gone. I knew it had been there when I first saw the thing; I knew it. And on the chair, and on the cement wall behind it, were streaks of what looked like mud, reddish mud, like something had gone up the wall and dragged these streaks behind it. When I got closer to the substance, the smell got stronger. I shone the light up into the hole where the square had been, but of course I couldn't see anything. There was just a little of the mud on the chair, not much, but it was also on the thin metal bars that made up the ceiling grid, the bars just above my head where the square had disappeared.

I considered standing on the chair and pointing the flashlight into the crawlspace above the ceiling. But my nerve finally failed me, and I wanted to get out of there. I left the room, and I went back up through the gym to the main entrance, and I opened one of the front doors of the school. I propped it open with a chair, and I stood outside where the buses dropped people off, and I didn't go back inside the school, at all. At one point I thought I heard something, and I clamped my hands to my ears. Finally the morning janitor showed up, both of them did, and I didn't say anything about anything. I just left. If they ever saw the chair and the substance the thing had left behind, I never heard about it.

I went to see Father Hall the next day. I only had the address he gave me, not a phone number. It was about a mile off the subway line, which I took most of the way east, and I got off the train in a deserted, industrial section of town. It was almost totally quiet at noon, just block after block of warehouses and auto garages and an abortion clinic and a plastics plant. I'd never been on that side of town before, but I was sure I had the metro train stop right. The address Father Hall had given me was for the shelter he worked at four days a week, but when I got to that address, it was a bowling alley that had been torn down long ago, and next to that some food distributor. Something had gone wrong, obviously, so I walked a couple of blocks in each direction, and I saw only one person, a UPS driver, go by me on the sidewalk toward his truck. I asked him if he knew where the shelter was, and he did. He told me to go back a few blocks, so I did, and on the way there I saw Father Hall walking toward me along the sidewalk. He waved at me, then came up and asked me if I had come to see him, and I said yes, and he said he was sorry for getting the address wrong; it was exactly thirty numbers off. He was headed off to teach a class in a church somewhere, but he said he had a while to talk, so we took a walk around this industrial section of town, which bordered on a notorious slum.

I didn't really fully understand why I had come, so I asked him some questions about the shelter, I think, and he asked me how I had been the last couple of days. We sat on a bus stop bench where no bus came anymore, and I told him I'd had a rough go of it; I thought I was seeing things. This led to me explaining what I saw at the school, and I had to tell him about my

problem with the painkillers and the drinking and my sentence because of it. Not once during the conversation did he check his watch or say he had to go, which didn't occur to me until long after. It was like he had just written off his class. I told him almost more than I had the first day. He listened very carefully, nodded a lot, and said he understood, and he asked me to describe again the thing I had seen in the basement. In the end, he asked me if I really wanted to go into the hospital, because if I thought I could hold on for a little while longer, there was something he wanted me to try.

He said my experiences with Peter and Maurice and my drinking and my despair had maybe harmed parts of my mind that I had never confronted before, all of that coming so fast. But seeing the thing in the boiler room might actually have been a good sign that I could make it out of this whole situation in one piece. He said seeing that creature may have been my mind's attempt to snap me into asking harder questions of myself. By going over the line into total fantasy, it was telling me I needed to be healed, desperately. Father Hall said that I should ask myself all the hard questions about my life I had been trying to avoid with drinking, but to do that I needed to screen out the influences of all human beings, every single one of them, and make myself more alone than most anyone was willing to do.

He said if I went without human contact for a while, human contact of any kind, the parts of me that had been fragmented and distorted would come back to me. I might be able to think clearly and find a path for myself that wasn't tainted by all the people who had been trying to claim me. And he himself would have to be included in that. Father Hall said I would really have to go it entirely alone, remove all traces of other humanity from my life to realize who I was. I should not work for a while, no friends, no TV, no newspapers, no speaking to strangers, no phone calls. He said it was an elementary psychological theory: by isolating yourself totally, you became more aware of yourself. Your awareness of who you were and what you really wanted and needed doubled, tripled, within days. And I liked this idea. He wasn't pushing God on me. He must have been very educated, I thought. If you absolutely have to drink, he said, just don't let it get out of hand, but people were as damaging to me now as alcohol could be, just for the next few weeks, maybe a couple of months. I simply had to remove myself. I had to do it. And then if I got better or worse, I should come see him, I should come back to Father Hall and tell him about it.

I told him I'd do it. I thought I could make it so that I saw almost no one. I could keep up with my sentence, I could keep going to the school, I didn't have to exchange so much as a word with the janitors, and I didn't have to go see my probation officer for another couple of weeks, maybe even three. I just wouldn't stay inside the school during my shifts. I wouldn't do the rounds they wanted me to; I couldn't even go back into the gym. I'd prop a door open and read in the doorway close to the parking lot. Every night. I told Father Hall I thought I could try it, and he said, 'All right, please do it, and if it doesn't help, we'll get help for you,' and he got up and walked back in the direction he had come, and he said he'd see me later.

What happened when I cut myself off from all the human contact I possibly could, killed off all the voices, was that I started to see how closely related and connected I was to all the things around me in my life. Connected to my bed, to the food I ate, to the sun, to the grass, my clothes, the clock, time moving past me. All these things were silent all through my life; they were there for me in a wholly accepting way, never a bad way. Everything around me was there to help me through life, and I saw how it was people alone who clouded things, because people could hurt me, they did hurt me, and when they weren't hurting me they made me feel like I had to be part

of them, part of everything they claimed was going on. But what was really going on, all that mattered and was permanent and good, was the daylight, and waking up and falling asleep, and cold weather, and hot weather, and the feel of things, my senses. Trees, animals, walking, resting, a table in my room—these were the things that would always be there, and never asked anything of me. I could experience them always exactly as I wanted to; they would never change; they would be there forever if I wanted. Objects and nature were permanent. But people had ideas that I had to adapt to constantly. People could kill, and worst of all they made you aware of how lonely you were. If there were no people in my life, if I had never let them in to begin with, I never would have known what loneliness was.

So I saw what Father Hall had been describing. I saw it inside of a week, and the only hard part was the darkness in my room, because I was scared of what I'd see. I had regressed to being a child in that way. In the dark, I wished I wasn't alone. So the very first night of the treatment, I went to get some food—but late, really, really late—at the all-night pharmacy so I would see as few people as possible, and I bought some sleeping pills, so I could black out immediately when I needed to sleep. During the day I went on long walks, but never anywhere where I could be seen, or I drove to the river and stayed there for hours, listening to music without vocals. I had always liked music without vocals, and now I was beginning to see why. I slept way too much, and I did drink, but when I ran out of liquor I didn't go get more, because paying for it would have made me have to see someone, and I didn't want that. I had no money left; I was living off my credit cards, so I'd go to the library at A.U. for hours at a time. I'd wear a face mask in the cold so no one could see me or talk to me, and I would isolate myself in a corner of the library and read.

That's where I read six different books about satanism, and in a book called *The Unfamiliar* I happened across a drawing of a hanged man wrapped in a black ribbon from head to toe; it was swallowing him. In that book I read about people who for no reason misperceived sensory things, like one man who drank blood at a satanic ceremony and honestly believed it had been nothing but water. To satanists, these errors of perception meant a door was opening up in the brain. If the door wasn't found and closed with their help, demons would come through. They waited until the door was so far open that the person would think nothing of seeing demons on the very street where he lived, wouldn't deny their existence because his senses were telling him to just accept everything, and then possession could begin.

I began to have nightmares, and in the nightmares there were always people, and they were chasing me, coming for me. It was as if they knew this was their only way to get me, since by day I had obliterated them from my life. The nightmares got longer and longer and worse and worse until by the end of ten or eleven days, I was scared to go to sleep. The nightmares started as soon as I went out. I was afraid to take more pills because I thought I would overdose. I wasn't eating much of anything, I realized. I would have a bowl of cereal, and that would be it for the day, or I would eat half a sandwich in twenty-four hours. And that would be all. So while I was beginning to feel free, I was sinking too, and I was very aware of it. If I had drunk a little more, maybe I never would have seen it, that I was fading. I didn't change my clothes; I didn't bathe; I didn't shave. More and more I would think about how easy it would be to just end it all instead of going back and telling all this to Father Hall or entering the hospital. It would be so much easier to just not eat anymore and let myself starve and not get out of bed. But no, I still wanted to live, and I forced myself out and back on the metro, and I took the train to the stop where I had met Father Hall near the shelter where he worked during the day. I was careful to take a shower and shave and dress myself neatly so it would look like I was in my right mind.

I went to see him on a freezing cold day when they were calling for a lot of snow. It was due to hit by four that afternoon, but I had to go anyway. I had a premonition that I might accidentally take too many pills, because I had so many in my room, more than I could ever use in a year. I had just kept on buying them and buying them. No one stopped me.

I walked all the way to the homeless shelter Father Hall had talked about. It was on the corner on a street across from a vacant lot, right on the border of the slum where about half the city's murders took place. I went in, and right there, right away, there were rows of cots, no lobby or desk or anything, just homeless people. Even at noon there were a few, because of the snow coming on. A man came walking up to me, a big red-haired guy, a military kind of guy, and he asked me if he could help me. I told him I was looking for Father Hall. He said, 'Father Who?' And I said again, Father Hall; I still didn't know his first name. And he looked at me in a funny way, and he said, 'Sorry, there's no one by that name who works here.' I said, 'Well, this man, this priest, told me that he worked here four days a week,' and the red-haired guy said he had been there almost every day for the past two years, and he had never heard of a Father Hall. So I thanked him and turned back to the entrance, and I stepped out and stood there for a minute, not knowing what to do. I thought I must have made some sort of stupid mistake.

Then I heard the guy's voice call me back, and he came to the doorway, and he said, 'Just a second; could you wait here just one minute? I'll be right back.' So he went to the back of the big room and disappeared through a door, and he came out again a few minutes later, more than a few minutes later actually, and he said, 'Would you do me a favor? Would you come talk to the man who runs the place? His name is Ned; he might have some information for you.' So I went with him; he led me back, between the rows of cots and six or seven people asleep on them. As we walked, he said something about how the name I had given him had struck a bell with him. He had almost forgotten what it was, but then he'd remembered.

I went back into a tiny office. The red-haired guy came in too, and behind a small desk there was a man in a sweater and jeans, he was about fifty and moved with a cane. This Ned wanted me to tell him about Father Hall. He wanted to know where I'd met him, and what he looked like, and what he talked about. So I told him, giving him a physical description and mentioning our talks, and then I asked him, 'Well, do you know of him?' He went around to the back of the desk again. I was sitting down across from it by then. I felt a little like I was talking to the police. Ned said maybe he knew him, maybe.

A year before, there had been a homeless woman who had stayed at the shelter off and on; he'd even forgotten her name. She'd been a drug addict and slightly unbalanced mentally, but she'd mentioned someone named Father Hall too. She had wanted Ned to tell Father Hall to stop visiting her. She'd said he found her every day, wherever she happened to be, and never stopped trying to start conversations with her. In the beginning he had been very kind to her, but then he had tried to get her to come away with him, not to church, but to a mission he talked about somewhere way outside the city. She'd claimed that Father Hall had begun to insist every day that she come with him, telling her he couldn't protect her if she didn't, that she'd wind up freezing to death, or being killed, so she had begun to fear him.

But the way she had talked about him to Ned, asking him every other day to keep Father Hall away from her, they had become convinced that there really was no Father Hall, since she had said he kept 'appearing' in her room, 'appearing' at the foot of her bed in the middle of the night. They'd thought she needed psychiatric care. Sometimes the homeless woman had claimed that

Father Hall wanted her to come work in a mission, and sometimes she'd said he wanted her to go to a palace. She'd said conflicting things, and she'd never known his first name. She'd said that he had been getting more and more cruel to her, for no apparent reason other than she wouldn't go with him. Eventually she had drifted off somewhere, stopped coming to the shelter; they'd never known what became of her. But now, to Ned, it seemed that with me coming in, maybe this Father Hall had been real all along. They wanted to know even more about what he looked like in case he showed up there. They had a lot of questions for him. I told them what I knew as best as I could, and then they let me leave.

There was a message on my machine at home that I didn't have to report to the school that night, because of the heavy snowfall. It started as soon as I got back to my room, and it kept going on well into the night. There were six inches on the ground by ten o'clock. I left my room again to walk to the park around the corner, and I sat there in the cold and I read till it got dark. Then once I got back in, I took some sleeping pills and went to bed. I woke up a little past midnight, not having dreamed at all, and it was still snowing. I got out of bed and stood in front of the window in my room, and I undid the blinds and I looked out. Even though it was dark, you could see everything because the whiteness of the snow reflected a lot of light, the way it does. You could go out and walk around no problem. It was just flurries falling by that time. I was on the third floor overlooking a little courtyard between the building and the one across from it. Outside in the snow I saw a man, all alone, sitting on a swing. There was a jungle gym in the middle of the courtyard for the neighborhood kids, and he was sitting there. And I saw that it was Father Hall.

He was facing away from me, sitting and looking off at the building across the way. I watched him for a few minutes, and never once did he turn around, but I could tell it was him. He was wearing the same clothes as when I had first met him, and then seen him the second time; no coat. That's how much detail I could see because of the full moon and the brightness of the snow. After a while I closed the blinds, and I wanted to get inside my closet, I wanted to get under the bed, disappear. But instead I sat on my couch and I waited, because I figured it was only a matter of time before he would come.

It seemed to take forever, but it must have only been about a half hour later when there was a knock at my door. I didn't answer the first knocking, but I did the second time it came. First I turned on all my lights, and I opened the door, and Father Hall was there, a little bit of snow in his hair. He sort of smiled at me and said it had taken him a while to figure out which building was mine. But he had raided his memory and finally figured it out. I don't think I said anything. He came in, and he sat down in a chair, and I sat on the sofa, and he said he was out late walking around and he wanted to know how things were going with me. I told him things were all right. He wanted to know how my little therapy experiment was going, and I was able to give him some details; I was trying to sound normal, and I did all right. He wanted to know if I'd ever seriously gone to church, ever in my life, what my experience with it had been. I didn't tell him what my first memory of church was, when I was six or seven, and my aunt had taken me to a cathedral in the city, and I had been terrified by the atmosphere and the figures on the stained glass, and the priest in his robe, and the long walk down the middle of the aisle; everything about it had frightened me. Father Hall didn't tell me why he wanted to know that, so I made something up. I told him I'd been to church a few times and had just never felt anything at all there.

He then said he had an idea for me, about what should come next. He had organized a gathering of people a little like me, four or five people who had been looking for some kind of guidance in

their lives, and he wanted us to go together to a farm on the Eastern Shore, a farm that his father had owned, and that he had the use of. It was on a stretch of open land near Princess Anne, Maryland. From time to time he made a retreat of it; he took people there for a few days of individual prayer and meditation. He and the others were leaving the next day, and he said I should join them. And I said, 'But no one's going anywhere; there's the snow,' and he said there wasn't much on the roads at all; it wouldn't be a problem. I told him I had gone to the shelter that day, and they hadn't seemed to know who he was, and I watched his eyes when he answered me, but there wasn't much of a delay for thought.

He said to me, 'Which shelter did you go to?' He said there were not just one or two but three of them within a five-block radius, and obviously I had gone to the wrong one. And he said I should definitely come with him on the retreat. It would be just for a few days, and I said I would have to be at the school to do my job there on Monday; it was part of my sentence; I couldn't go off. He said, 'But if I can fix it so you wouldn't have to go back, I'd like to do that for you,' and I said, 'How?' And he said I should just give him the number of the person I was responsible to, and he would take care of it. I could give it to him when I met him and the others for the trip. I didn't need to bring a single thing; it was just for a few days. He wanted me to meet him in the parking lot of RFK Stadium the next night, at eight o'clock, and he said the roads would be clear by then, no doubt, and I could meet the others, and he would drive us to the farm. We would sleep over and be fresh for the next morning. He made me promise, I remember, that I would at least come and meet the others, the next night at eight o'clock. And it occurred to me very quickly that all I needed to do to get Father Hall to leave was to agree. If I agreed he would go immediately, and he did. He got up out of the chair and said he would let himself out, and he smiled at me, and he went out the door. He left me alone, just like I knew somehow he would if I just agreed to whatever he said.

I went back to bed, but I was wide awake and would be for a long time, and what I was afraid of more than anything then was Father Hall coming back. I wanted to get out of the building entirely. I waited just a little while, to make sure he couldn't be anywhere outside, and then I put on my clothes and my shoes and my coat, and I went out. It came to me as I walked out why I didn't seem to really need alcohol anymore, why I had no craving for it suddenly. The alcohol had made me forget the Z-sominol, and the thing that had made me forget about alcohol, I realized, was fear. My body was drowning in it. There was no need, and no room, for anything else. I walked down the road, seeing just an occasional snowplow. No one was out because the roads were pretty bad. No one was going to be driving anywhere. I went right down the center of the road. It was a little more than two miles to the high school, and when I got there, there was absolutely no one around. It seemed like the entire world was asleep.

From walking around the school during my nights there as a guard, and from what the principal had told me, I knew a couple of ways I could get inside the building. One was by going around the back of the school, on the woods side, and climbing up the pipes back there. There was a whole network of pipes attached to the brick beside the industrial arts department and the auto shop rooms. It wasn't difficult to get up the pipes, because there were a lot of horizontal ones. Some kids might have climbed them in the past, but what they probably didn't know was that there was actually a window up there that was never locked because the lock had rusted so badly it had finally been removed. I climbed the pipes—they were slippery but I managed—and I just went into the window up there, twelve feet off the ground. I worked the window upward with one hand as I steadied myself with my right. I threw my legs over the sill, and I fell a couple of feet into a storage room. It led out in the hallway right around the corner from the two computer rooms. I couldn't get in—they were locked and I had no key—so I broke into one

of them. I had bent a coat hanger before I'd left my room and shoved it into my coat, and in the hallway I undid it, and I shoved it into the keyhole. The door was a couple of decades old, really cheap, and the lock eventually popped and I went in.

I sat down in the dark and turned on one of the computers and sat down in front of it, and I was lucky because there was no code necessary to get onto the Internet, so that's what I did, there in the school, at about two in the morning. There was still snow on my shoulders from the flurries; it hadn't even melted yet. First I checked around to see if there were some other homeless shelters, or youth shelters, in the area where the one had been where they'd told me they'd never heard of Father Hall. It took about a half hour, and I didn't find mention of anything in that area except for the one. The closest other shelter was quite a ways away. Then I wasn't sure what to check, so I typed in words like 'false priest,' 'impersonator,' 'impersonating priests,' variations of those, and no stories came up at all. So I actually typed in 'Father Hall' and called up all the results. There were more than three hundred, so I started going through them, one by one, reading the descriptions to see if anything struck me.

I had been doing that for about fifteen minutes, not finding anything that had anything to do with the Father Hall I knew, when I thought I heard a door close, far below me, a sound identical to the one I'd heard the night I'd gone into the boiler room. It was the same in every way, just so much fainter that I couldn't prove to myself it had really happened. I sat perfectly still, my fingers on the keyboard of the computer, for five minutes. I could see out into the hallway, but it was totally dark. I waited for something else to happen, maybe some other sound, but there was nothing. Finally, I had myself convinced that I had imagined it, that it was some other sound and I'd turned it into something it wasn't. My imagination was leading me places I didn't have the courage to go.

I followed every link to the phrase 'Father Hall' that I could. I spent some time reading text that led me to no answers at all. The twentieth or thirtieth link I clicked on took me to a website having to do with the history of Alberta, Canada, and there was a subsection of links having to do with various towns and cities in it. I clicked on a few, but I didn't see any reference to a Father Hall until I started reading about a place in northern Alberta called Fort Illard. It had been a logging camp for thirty years, from 1911 to 1941. It was in Fort Illard that a murderer named Horatio Vello was hanged in 1937. The website had some of the story, because it had been one of the most infamous murder cases in the history of Canada during the first part of the twentieth century. From the basics it gave, I was able to find the entire story on a different website, one specifically about famous murders. It told me everything.

In 1937 there were more than eight hundred men living at the logging camp in Fort Illard, beside the Peace River. They were there ten months a year. The nearest other settlement was called Hulst, which was basically a sister camp to the south where the wood felled in Fort Illard was processed and put on trucks and trains to be transported around the country. It was nine miles away, down the river. Since both camps consisted entirely of men, of course there was a lot of drinking and fighting all year, and also a lot of gambling; these workers didn't make a lot of money, and they were desperate to make more. The gambling was operated by two foremen in Hulst, and bets were taken and money exchanged via the boats that went back and forth. These two foremen were very ruthless, and were basically working for an organized crime syndicate all the way in Detroit. People who got too far behind were routinely beaten up by workers at Fort Illard who wanted to make extra money by enforcing collections of the bets.

In the late thirties, there was one man who was an especially reckless gambler, an addict, living

in the camp, and he sank deeper and deeper over the course of a year. He enraged the bookies in Hulst too much for them to ignore, and then he finally refused to pay them anything. He claimed he had been cheated in some way. The word came from Detroit that the crime bosses who operated through the foremen literally wanted him dead. It would be almost impossible to kill him though, because in such a small isolated population everyone would suspect the two or three men who usually did the enforcements on the bets, so they sent word back that it couldn't be done. The foremen who worked for the men in Detroit tried to get out of it, but they couldn't do it. For the gambling to continue, this man who refused to pay his debts would have to die. What made it even more difficult, even more strange, was that this man was the camp chaplain. He was a Catholic priest, a priest with a gambling addiction as well as a drinking problem. He'd been in Fort Illard for three years. He was a tall, strong man, a street priest in Montreal when he was a little younger. His name was Anton Hall.

Messages were exchanged back and forth between the two camps, between one of the enforcers in Fort Illard and one of the foremen in Hulst, whose name was Sturridge. The snow was so deep at that time of year that most of the contact between the two camps, unless it had to do specifically with business, was by messages taken by boat. What it came down to was that no one at Fort Illard was willing to kill Father Hall, even when Sturridge, who was desperate to keep himself out of horrible trouble with the men in Detroit, offered a lot of his own money to have it done. One night, Sturridge's connection was sitting in his shack in Fort Illard with the only two other men who knew what was going on. A man knocked on the door, and when he came in, he introduced himself as Horatio Vello. Vello was a worker who never seemed to say anything to anyone, who worked and slept and kept out of trouble and had no friends that anyone knew of. Some people thought he was married, but it turned out his wife had died of cancer long ago. Vello said that for a price he was willing to kill Father Hall. First of all, the men in the shack demanded to know how Vello knew what was going on, and he would only say that he had overheard some things from time to time. He said that if his gambling debts were forgiven, he would commit the murder. It turned out that Vello owed the people in Hulst a total of thirty dollars. He had placed exactly two bets in ten months, both on college football games. Thirty dollars was his price to do this thing.

The men agreed. Sturridge sent word to Vello that if he was caught and he said anything, he too would be murdered. Vello said he understood and that there wouldn't be a problem. Then to make sure there was no secret deal between Vello and Father Hall, Sturridge insisted that evidence of the crime be kept after the body was buried, disposed of. This meant he wanted to see a thumb, a toe, something as proof that Father Hall hadn't just conveniently disappeared. Vello was supposed to send the evidence down the river on one of the small freight rafts that came into Hulst from Fort Illard every other day. Men would simply guide these huge rafts down the river after filling them with excess supplies and wood that could only be used as fire fuel. Vello was supposed to mark a certain crate so only Sturridge would know what was inside. Four days passed, and down the river came three small freight rafts with their three oarsmen, and Sturridge and his partner went out to supervise the unloading. They spotted a red slash on a big crate, and they lifted the heavy crate off the raft and took it into a shack where no one could see. When they lifted the top of the crate, they saw the entire body of Father Hall. He had been put into the crate naked, in a sitting position. His head, his hands, and his feet had been all cut off and were all set in his lap. And every one of his fingers had been individually cut off the hands. The men were revolted, and they buried the remains as quickly as they could.

A few days after the murder, Vello, who had almost never said a word to anyone in three years, and was assumed to be borderline illiterate, began to talk, and he talked a lot, to anyone who

would listen, about some very strange things. His main theme was human anatomy, which he began to study voraciously from the single textbook he managed to borrow from the camp's doctor. In particular, he was obsessed with the human body's 'cruel determination' to 'hide' the human intellect and the soul. He believed that every trace of our authentic being had to reside somewhere inside the body, and could be found if it were dissected thoroughly enough. He couldn't believe there was a disconnect between the soul and the brain, or the spirit and the raw material of the heart. He didn't understand how the raw lump of biology that was the human body, with its dumb organs and tissues and blood, could produce the unique actions and thoughts and feelings of a philosophical, doubting, sensitive human being. Some men in the camp described him as being horrified, deeply disturbed by the fact that a man, opened up on a table, was so suddenly reduced to animal, even plant form, and all vestiges of his humanity were gone. He believed the keys to identity had to be inside the body somewhere, that there must be something physical in the brain that made us hate or fear or love or create music; there must be some hidden valve or muscle in the heart that accounted for heroism.

When they found Vello's diary later on, they found one particular passage in which he described how, shortly after mutilating Father Hall, he became unable to have any moment of consciousness in which he did not imagine himself less than a man. In his mind he was suddenly nothing more than a lurching assortment of organs and bones, and his existence became absurd to him, freakish. He could only imagine himself without flesh, a walking skeleton. At his trial the prosecution argued this is what drove him utterly insane, even beyond the madness that had caused him to kill Father Hall and do unspeakable things to the body, on the spur of the moment, as he said in his diary, out of 'curiosity' after he had severed Father Hall's left hand.

Within a week after the killing, the messages back and forth between the camps, and all the conversation around Fort Illard about why Father Hall had disappeared, made it obvious to Sturridge that Horatio Vello had to die next. There wasn't much time. Sturridge got on a boat to Fort Illard himself to arrive in the middle of the night and put an end to this man who was coming closer and closer to exposing everything. He just wouldn't shut up. But Vello was gone by then. He had vanished. After a few days went by, a couple of men hiked into the woods and knocked on the doors of three small houses lived in by a trapper and his extended family. There was no answer at any of them, but through the windows of one of the houses, the men saw that something was very wrong. They broke into all of them, and in each they found the remains of the people who had lived there. Four men, three women, eight children, all of them cut up. Body parts were everywhere; not one limb remained on any of them. The limbs were lying about inside various rooms in no conceivable pattern; they'd just been left there. The torsos were all gone, though. A quarter of a mile away in the woods they found Vello. He was working in the open air, dissecting each one of the torsos with nothing more than the knives from the houses and his bare hands. He was very calm when they found him. He didn't say anything.

His trial was quick. He kept his mouth shut and didn't offer any defense, even to his lawyers. He just told them that if they worked from his diary, they could make the jury see why he had done what he had done. He didn't mind being found guilty, so he pleaded that way. The only words he spoke publicly came just a few seconds before he was hung. He said out loud, 'There are a few others who should get a proper burial.' Before anyone could ask him what that meant, his neck was snapped and he died. No one ever found any more human remains, though they searched for them all over, as well as they could, considering the weather in Alberta. His diary mentioned only what he had tried to learn from cutting up Father Hall, no one else. He hadn't even gotten around to writing about his experiments with the wood people.

That was in 1937. The website didn't have much more. It did have a picture of Horatio Vello, though, taken from a newspaper, actually only an hour before he was hung. And it had one of Father Hall. It was a very clear photo; they both were. The priest who had tried to become my friend over the past couple of weeks didn't look anything like Father Hall. In the photo, Father Hall, the gambling addict, had blonde hair and a moustache. Who the priest who came to my room looked exactly like, exactly, was Horatio Vello. There was no mistaking the resemblance. It was exact. The hair was the same; the facial features were the same, especially the small eyes. In the newspaper photo, they were looking off into the distance as he stood beside the gallows.

I didn't hear any more sounds inside the school, and I left at about four in the morning. I just walked out one of the doors in the back, and I walked as fast as I could through the snow back to my room. Sometimes I looked back over my shoulder to see if anyone else was on the street. No one was there. No snowplows went by, even. When I opened the door to my room I was frightened because the lights were on. Then I realized I must have left them on myself.

At five o'clock the next afternoon I was on the metro train, standing with human beings for the first time in weeks, and after a thirty-minute ride I got off at the RFK Stadium stop. I just wanted to see what it looked like, what was there. I wanted to see the place where I had been told to go. I had to see it. It was a compulsion. In the thirty minutes it took to get there, I didn't even truly see the people around me or hear their voices or even sense the movement of the train. I was so alone that I had basically disappeared. Where I had gone was deep inside my own body. I was looking out through my eyes, but I was hiding way behind them, far down in my brain. My body was just a shell to protect me. I never forced this feeling on myself; it just came. No one on the train could have possibly known what they were really looking at when they looked at me.

I got off the train at RFK and I was alone. There had been nothing really going on in the stadium for years. Just flea markets on the weekends in the parking lot, and an occasional soccer game; nothing else at all. I stepped out of the station and went up above ground and walked a ways. The parking lot was huge, just vast and empty, section after section, abandoned. I almost couldn't see the other end of it. The cement was crumbling, and there were a few inches of snow covering it. The sun was almost completely down, and no lights anywhere came on. Way off in the distance there was a line of row houses, and a highway, but it was just me, entirely alone. The stadium wasn't even very close. I just walked through the parking lot for several minutes, watching the last of the sun go down, knowing that when it was perfect dark, I had to leave. I absolutely couldn't be there at eight. I knew he'd be there exactly then.

But when I thought how this could be the end of everything I'd endured, I started to not want to go. I thought, Why should I stay alive, what for? And what would it be like to stay here until eight o'clock, and find out something that maybe no one living ever had, to stumble into some knowledge that only I would know? No one would be like me, and maybe the worst that could happen to me was that I died, or maybe that wasn't the worst, but what might I find out, how different would the world seem if I met Father Hall here, tonight, and know the mystery of giving myself over to something that would break my imagination? There seemed no reason to ever go back to my room. Whatever would be here in a couple of hours, it would be immense. Going with Father Hall would be the only bravery I'd ever know.

This is the logic my mind had constructed, which I see now was just a demented wish for

suicide. But back then, instead of walking back to the station as night emerged, I walked along the very outer edges of the parking lot in a circle, getting warmer and warmer. And it got dark fast. I saw headlights creeping toward me. It was a cab that had swung off the main road and into the parking lot, taking a chance that I might be a viable fare. The window rolled down, and this Asian man asked me if I needed a taxi. And I snapped back into sensibility; all it took was seeing his face. I got into the back and he drove away. It was perfectly warm inside; I couldn't believe I had ever been outdoors. It seemed impossible. He turned onto the main road, and I told him I wanted to go to Union Station. I don't know why I said that. All I wanted was to see the lights of the city. I turned back at one point as we drove away and looked at the parking lot. I thought about Father Hall seeing my footsteps in the snow.

Ten minutes into the ride we were in the city. It was six thirty, and I began to feel very strange, very light-headed. I felt hollowed out, like I had lost fifty pounds out of nowhere. As I was looking through the cab window at the storefronts passing by, I saw that dark mass that I had seen in my room; it was there again, on the sidewalk. At first I thought I was looking at a black box. This time the mass was coming for me much faster, and I turned away; I looked out the other window, but it was everywhere in my vision, a fixed point, coming at me. I closed my eyes, but it was also there inside my eyes, getting bigger, and I cried out to the cab driver. All I said was 'Help me,' and I heard him say, 'What's the matter? What's the matter?' All of a sudden I had passed out, and the last thing I saw inside my closed eyes was the image of the street through the front of the cab window. It was Independence Avenue, backed up with traffic, and the whole image turned bright green in an instant, like someone had set off a nuclear bomb miles away. And then I had no consciousness whatsoever; I was gone.

When I became aware of things next, I was in a rowboat. I was standing in it, balancing myself on the waves of the ocean. Above me the sky was as threatening as any I had ever seen. It was so dark I thought it was night. I was about fifty feet off the beach, getting closer and closer to it. There was a man with his back to me on the beach, and in his hands he was holding a stick as tall as he was, and he was making letters in the sand. He had already made hundreds of them. The entire beach to the left and right was covered in writing, letters two feet high spelling out something I couldn't read yet. He must have been working for hours and hours. The boat bumped the shore just a few steps away from him, and I stepped out. I went up to the man, and I touched his shoulder as he was making the letter *l* in the sand with the stick. He turned to me. It was Maurice.

He smiled when he saw me. He said, 'I'm glad you came. Now I don't have to keep writing you this message. I can tell you in person.' He swept his arm across the beach, where the words he'd scrawled went east and west toward nothingness. We walked together, along the beach. The water was quiet, but I thought there was a massive storm coming, and we were just in the calm before it. I asked Maurice what was happening to me. He said that yes, Father Hall was who I thought he was. He was the murderer Horatio Vello. He had befriended three living people since his death in 1937. He had attempted the first 'friendship' five years after he was hung. The second came just a year ago, when he had spoken many times to a homeless woman who lived in the same city I did.

'Why me?' I asked, and Maurice said that I must have become weak, suggestible to anything, especially my own death. In my weakness I had thinned the line between myself and Horatio Vello. He had been waiting on the other side, searching endlessly for a despairing person he could persuade into isolating himself totally, so much so that a total 'exchange' was possible. If I were to meet him that night, Maurice said, Vello would come alone. There would be no others.

What would happen then, no one knew. No one had ever known, nor seen what took place during one of these exchanges. For the weaker party, it would be quick and violent, unimaginably painful, and whatever I was would die. Vello would be on the earth again, not living, but present, aware, able to touch and feel, and that was all he wanted. I asked Maurice what I could do, where I could run. He said he didn't know. But I had to stay close to other people, maybe for a long time, so that Vello would no longer come near me. I had to never be alone, not for a moment. If I ever felt something trying to pull me out of the world again, I should scream, shriek, do everything I could to be seen and heard by other people.

And I began to shout at Maurice in anger, shaking and crying, and I said, 'It's you who made me this way; this is because of what you did,' and he said, 'Yes, I had a part in this; I helped you to become weak; I was part of the cause. I did it to you, and long ago, someone did it to me.' When he said that, I saw an awful sadness in his face. I said, 'Are you in me now, Maurice? Is that what's happened to me? Have you taken me over?' And he said, 'Yes, but I'll be gone soon. I don't know how to stay, and I don't want to. I want to rest. Maybe now I can be allowed to rest.' We were standing in the water, the ocean. I felt it; we were ankle deep in it. I looked up at the sky, and when I looked back at Maurice, he was on his knees in the water. It was up to his chest, and he slumped forward with his eyes open. I tried to grab him, but he went face first into the water and sunk heavily, and within three seconds he was totally under. He disappeared under the surface, and I didn't try to save him. I turned back to the beach and splashed towards it, the water hitting my face.

There was another strange jump cut. I went from seeing Maurice sink in the water to being on a street in Washington, and for ten seconds I had no idea how I had gotten there. Then I remembered I had been in a cab and cried out for help, and the driver must have put me out of the cab, or maybe I jumped out, because I was on F Street, walking along the sidewalk, seeing people coming towards me. My body felt like it was full of water, all the way from my feet to my head. I walked toward the brightest lights I could see. I turned a corner, and there was a bar there, and I went right in. The place was packed. It was an Irish bar; a band was playing, and people were everywhere. I just stayed in there for an hour or more, and I looked out the window at one point at the people passing by, and I realized that there was no snow on the street, no snow on the ground. In fact there hadn't been any when I had awoken from the ocean.

I asked a man at the bar what the date was, and he said he thought it was the fifteenth but it might have been the fourteenth, and that told me that it had been almost eleven days since I'd gone to the parking lot at RFK Stadium. I'd lost eleven days of my life with no memory of how I'd spent it since I'd passed out in the Asian man's cab. I was still wearing the same clothes as when I'd gone to the parking lot, and physically I was hungry but not overly so, unshaven but not overly so. Eleven days, just gone. But I was safe, in the bar, and I stood there for three more hours, until it started to thin out. It was almost midnight on a Friday. I followed a group of people out onto the sidewalk, then went into another bar, and after that an all-night club nearby, and after that an all-night diner. Mostly I just stood and watched the people, and in the diner I drank cup after cup of coffee, keeping myself awake. At six in the morning I called a cab that took me to the nearest hotel, and I slept. When I took one more cab back to my room the next morning, the lock had been changed. I assumed I had been evicted, and I didn't bother asking about my things. Also, I never called my probation officer, because I assumed that in my fugue state I had never gone back, and was in a lot of trouble. I just walked away from my life.

From that point forward, for almost three years, I made every attempt imaginable never to be alone for any reason if it could possibly be helped. I left Washington the very next day, leaving all of my possessions. I had only one hundred forty dollars and my clothes, and I took a crowded bus to Baltimore, where with incredible luck I got a room in a group house downtown that very first day, me and seven other people. I paid for the room by getting the biggest cash advance I could against my credit card. Someone was always in the house with me. I went out looking for a job the next day when the streets were busy, and a week later I had one, at a mall at the Inner Harbor.

Going to and from work I took public transportation to be surrounded by people. I arranged my schedule so I would arrive and leave work when there were guaranteed to be people on the street. I wouldn't even stand at the bus stop alone. On my days off I went to bookstores and museums and movies and sat in restaurants for hours at a time. I made as many friends as I possibly could. If for some reason the house became empty, some freak chance where all my roommates were gone, I left immediately for a populated place. Even going into a public bathroom, I tried to wait till someone else was in there too. On Thanksgiving I worked in a soup kitchen. Christmas day, too, just to not be alone. I never drank. Three years I lived that way. There were a few times when I wound up alone, for ten or fifteen minutes at the most. They were awful, but I got through them. And I didn't see the man calling himself Father Hall again. I didn't see Maurice again either. I was never pulled out of this world.

Finally, after I got an office job, and began to look into graduate school once again, I moved out of the group house and into a townhouse with a friend at work. I felt I was ready to live normally again. I started looking around for a therapist, maybe one who would at least pretend to believe that everything that had happened to me was real. Last summer I found myself in that townhouse one night completely alone, a few weeks after my friend Paul and I had moved in. He had gone to Illinois to visit his mother. I'd be alone for almost a week. I wasn't sure how I was going to deal with it. That first night I rented a lot of movies to keep my mind off things, and finally I fell asleep in my bedroom at about two. At about four by the clock radio, I came awake; I didn't know why. I looked around my bedroom, keeping the light off, and didn't see anything. But I felt strange. And very soon I was terrified. I knew I had to speak; I had to say something. So I said what I had said three years before. I called out in my room, very loudly, for Satan to show himself. This time, nothing happened. I waited and waited. I didn't leave the house; I didn't run. There was such hate in me, I felt strong enough to face whatever might come for me. Nothing came. There was only silence.

I got up out of bed. I went down the hallway into the living room. Even now I couldn't say why I felt the need to leave my room. The living room was totally dark, just moonlight coming in through the big picture window. Someone was standing in the corner of the room, in front of it. But it wasn't a man. It was a thing more than seven feet tall, swathed in a black robe, a wrap of no material I could recognize, and it was staring out the window. It was just the same as when I had seen it years before in the boiler room of the high school, except now I was seeing its full height. Its hood was drawn back so I could see its misshapen head, its huge head with the featureless crimson eyes that didn't seem to be looking at anything. Its arms were hanging by its sides. The arms went almost all the way down to the floor. I stood there, looking at it, and very slowly its head turned to look at me. There was that line of mouth; I could see it perfectly from all the way across the room; the moonlight hit it just right. It said nothing. Again it did nothing, but this time the eyes were taking me in; they weren't comatose any longer. And we stared at each other, both of us a freak that didn't belong in the other's world, but we had somehow crossed over. I felt like I had nothing to fear from it then. Whatever it was, whatever

it represented, it hadn't come to claim me. Again, very slowly, after a full minute, it turned its head back to the window. It wanted me just to see it; I was sure of it. I found the strength to turn my back to it and move back down the hallway, trying not to make a sound, and I knew it was gone as soon as I walked away. I wouldn't go back to make sure. I went solely on faith that I had seen that being for the very last time.

That was the end of all of it. For the past two years I've been healthy and reasonably happy, and reasonably normal. I can be alone and not afraid, and though I can't talk about most of these things in therapy, as soon as I understood that it wasn't all just in my mind, that it all really happened to me, I could start to put it behind me. The only thing that brought it back and made me need to tell the story here was something that happened five days ago, when I went to church for the first time since I was seven years old. I still have bad moments where I don't want to be alone, and I get bad vibes, and this was one of those times. I was waiting for a bus that just wasn't showing up for some reason, and the street had emptied, and I saw a church on the corner, so I went in about fifteen minutes before services ended.

I was sitting there listening to a sermon about gratitude when I happened to notice a piece of something hanging on someone's shoulder a few pews ahead. It was a piece of long black ribbon, hanging off someone's shirt. I thought, How strange. As I watched it, it lifted up gently, and I saw how long it really was, maybe seven feet long, and thin, and it slithered away from that person's shoulder. It drifted without sound between two people in the pew ahead of him, and in the air it slowly worked its way to the right, disappeared for a moment, then reappeared around someone's hands, totally unseen. Then it snaked forward and passed in front of someone's face, completely unnoticed except by me. As I watched it, it wove and twisted around ten, a dozen people, drifting in the air, finally going downwards, to the floor, out of my sight, and then gone. I still don't know what it means. I can't possibly know what it means. Some things will be beyond me forever, I guess. Now that this has all been set down, whatever happens to me in the future, maybe at least anyone reading this will say: *He doesn't seem insane.* That's all I want. I hope I've managed that.

Now, at least, the tale is told.

rebirth

My name is Christian Barrett. For the past two years I've put out monthly episodes of a video podcast called 'Creaky Footsteps,' a casual tour of various supposedly haunted houses in my

general geographical area, the eastern part of South Carolina. It's consisted of little more than me shooting some footage of an abandoned house somewhere and narrating it with text based on dubious local legends, some of which I must admit I created myself to bolster my content. I began to get more and more subscribers over the course of the podcast, though I was never more than a one-man operation. For the second anniversary episode I decided to do something a little more ambitious.

Last Friday night I got off work at my small I.T. company in Charleston, and after grabbing a quick dinner, I started driving north, and in ninety minutes I had crossed the state line. In another two hours I had entered a part of North Carolina I'd never been to and was wholly unfamiliar with. My destination was the town of Lenore, on Onslow Bay. The town was considered the shame of Pamlico County, if not the state itself. It was apparently a suffering backwater, connected to civilization only by rural Route 78, called Loon's Neck Road. Once long ago it had received cargo boats at its rundown docks, but that had stopped in the seventies. The town had less than a thousand people left, and in fact it had become the largest incorporated area with the fewest citizens in all of North Carolina. Every part of it had fallen into neglect, judging from the few photos I had seen. Not helping matters was a book published by some hack in the late nineties called *The Town With Many Eyes*, a collection of allegedly true campfire tales ascribing all sorts of supernatural upheaval to the place. I had never read it. It was only because the town had developed such a reputation, in fact, that I had refrained for so long from doing some sort of episode of the podcast there; it almost seemed too obvious.

I was only thirty minutes away from Lenore, and I'd begun to look for signs to Loon's Neck Road, when my cellphone rang on the seat beside me. When I said hello, I was greeted by a voice I didn't recognize. A man introduced himself as Vincent Muhlbeck, an historian. He didn't know me, but he had heard I put out a show about haunted places, and he'd seen on my website that my next episode, to be released two days from now, was going to be about Lenore. I confirmed this information, a little confused about how this person had gotten my phone number, but it didn't occur to me just then to ask.

This man, Vincent Muhlbeck, spoke to me very plainly and directly, in a flat and entirely unemotional voice. He asked me to please not go to Lenore, not at all, for it could be very dangerous to me. His tone was so serious I almost laughed, it was so disorienting. When I asked him what he meant, he said he wasn't at liberty to explain, but he had no stake in what happened to me beyond wanting to warn me or anyone with me that something was going on in Lenore that was a threat to anyone inside the town. I was at a total loss. I told him I was in fact headed there at that moment, and there was a long silence on the line. When this man spoke again, he reaffirmed to me that this was a terrible mistake, that my life might be at risk. I asked him to back up and explain from the beginning how he had come to call me, but suddenly the line went dead. He had hung up on me.

I lowered the phone from my ear and focused on the long dark road ahead of me, trying to replay the brief conversation in my head while navigating by the light of my high beams. The area was growing more hilly, and there were still some patches of snow and ice on the road from a light dusting the night before. At last I felt I had to simply slow down to about thirty miles per hour just to process everything more easily. There had been a certain familiarity to Muhlbeck's name, and something about the way he spoke. If he was a nutcase, he was completely convincing. I wished there had been some inkling of hysteria in his voice, but there had been none. I stopped for gas at a place called Morton's and walked to the edge of the tarmac to clear my head. I checked Muhlbeck's number and dialed it. The connection was terrible, but

there was no answer anyway. To make myself feel better, I then walked up to the cashier's window and asked the man there directions to Lenore, which I didn't really need. I just wanted to know if he'd come out with some superstitious nonsense. He didn't. I asked him specifically if he'd ever heard anything strange about the place. He had not. I got back in my car and drove on.

Soon I saw the first mention of Lenore. The word was printed alone on a small brown metallic sign. It said only how many miles away it was. Steering with one hand again, I placed a call to my wife. She picked up on the first ring. I asked her if she had given my name to someone named Vincent Muhlbeck, and she said no, so I asked her to do a quick search of the Internet for him. She would have to call me back a little later. She was visiting relatives in New York, and when I told her where I was headed, she surprised me by telling me she was worried. She'd read some things about Lenore in the past and wasn't crazy about the idea of me going there alone at night with a video camera. I told her I'd be fine.

I was on Loon's Neck Road in twenty more minutes. It truly was a seemingly endless country drive bending away from the ocean with nothing but depleted fields and marshland on either side. No cars seemed to come from the other direction, and no one was behind me. A sign even smaller than the first one I'd seen let me know I had reached my destination. Again there was just that one word: Lenore. I entered on the town's south side, which looked like it had once housed the industrial district. There was a collection of decaying brick buildings, most of them unmarked, a couple with signs that looked like they were at least fifty or sixty years old. Only one streetlight in three was working. Not having any specific map of the town, I cruised slowly east toward Onslow Bay, which I reached in about five minutes. Beyond two or three abandoned hotels, more like flophouses by the look of them, and a series of dark warehouses, there was a port. Two piers jutted out into a narrow part of the bay. There were no boats in sight. I couldn't tell if a single one had been here recently; it certainly didn't look like it.

I bypassed Lenore's main street, which was the usual collection of shuttered shops, and got into more of the residential part of town. I went past something called Bill Williams Elementary School, and there was a stretch of cheap row houses that went for more than a mile. I started to worry that I hadn't planned enough and that the building I was looking for would take me forever to find. But I lucked across it soon enough. Off Tower View Road there was Mason, and it dead-ended at St. Anysia's Church. This place was the main reason I had come to Lenore. I parked on the side of the road in my choice of spots, since there was nothing near the church but an empty field and some cracked tennis courts surrounded by a chain-link fence.

I took my camera and my heavy-duty flashlight and got out of the car into the cold. Looking around me, I saw no one, and it occurred to me I hadn't seen a single soul on the streets since I'd gotten there. Two cars had driven past me, and that was it. This was on a Friday night at a little past eleven thirty. The church was dark—not a single light visible from outside it—but that was expected, since the place was shut down years before. I walked up the steps to the front doors, expecting them to be locked, but they weren't. I looked briefly behind me to see if anyone was watching, but of course there was no one. I pushed the right-hand door inward just a bit. It was incredibly heavy, but it opened with no problem. I decided to go all the way in and close it behind me, turning my flashlight on, since there was no electricity.

There I was, inside St. Anysia's Church, which had made Lenore briefly famous in 2004. Instead of tearing it down, they'd merely stopped using it, but apparently the building was going to remain at the end of this little road forever. Half of the pews had been ripped out, exactly half,

just the ones on the left side. There was no longer any altar, no adornments of any kind. The stained-glass windows were intact, but there wasn't much else to signify that services had once been performed here. There was a tiny bit of light after all, and seeing it nearly sent me back out into the cold for the shock of spotting it. On the filthy floor in the center of the church was a single candle, sitting on what looked like a dinner plate. The candle was thick and had once been fairly tall, but it was wearing down to almost nothing. There was so much burned wax surrounding it that it might have been burning for a day or more. Someone had been here very recently. I shone the beam of the flashlight all around, now paranoid that I was being watched. But it really seemed I was totally alone.

I would have normally set my video camera up on its tripod now and shot some video, especially since I had never expected this lucky break of getting inside the church. But I felt I wanted to be out of there fast, so I quickly just got some handheld shots of the interior for the purpose of overdubbing the narration later. Here, I would say, right here the six children were found in 2004, none of them yet harmed but drugged and then literally taped down to the floor between the two aisles of pews, taped down clumsily with electrical tape so they wouldn't be able to move if they awoke. On each of their palms someone had painted a symbol of an eye divided in two, a clear gap between the two halves. Inside that gap was a six-pointed star. In the back of the church Father Pat Tarkenton was found stabbed to death. Parked outside had been the van that had been driven by the woman who'd abducted the children six hours before from a nearby playground. This was the culminating incident in a chain of recent cult practices that had brought a sinister aura to Lenore that would stick forever.

It was said that there was not one but two cults working in the town, leaving drawings on the sides of buildings that showed an eye split down the middle. Vandalism had occurred, assaults, arrests, yet absolutely no one ever admitted involvement with any cult until 2004. The woman who'd abducted the children had apparently agreed to cooperate with the authorities, but two days after her arrest she'd been found in her cell dead of a heart attack at age twenty-six. Far stranger still was the fate of the children who had been taken and branded with black ink. They were all dead by 2009, all of them, of various causes: two car accidents, two cases of leukemia, and a brother and sister both dead in a fire. And so Lenore, already a place people didn't like to talk about, was branded a cult town. Its population had dropped fifty percent in ten years. There was just enough information about what had happened to give rise to endless speculation, and not anywhere near enough facts to really know what was going on here, if anything at all.

I got my footage of the interior of St. Anysia's Church and turned to leave. I shone the flashlight against the doors and saw what had been painted on them in letters four feet high. It was a date: 12/19/10. This was today's date. Wanting to be out of there right now, I opened the doors a crack to peer out onto the street. The moment I was sure no one was out there, I left the church, moving briskly down the steps. I didn't feel safe again until I was inside my car. I forced a little laugh out just to make myself feel ridiculous for locking the door. I started the car right up and pulled away from the curb. I was not leaving, not just yet. I didn't want to leave until I had a little more footage of the town, and after I had confirmed that the rumors about Lenore's lack of cellphone reception were completely true, I had to take care of one last thing.

I drove past the tiny post office and spotted a pay phone beside it. I parked again and called my wife. She seemed relieved to hear from me. She said the reason the name Vincent Muhlbeck had sounded familiar to me was because it was connected to the case of Ralph Broglie. Ralph Broglie had been a prisoner in maximum security in Montreal and died during an apparent botched exorcism. Vincent Muhlbeck, who was now a wanted man in Canada, had been the name of the

man who'd hired the pair of exorcists who'd accidentally or otherwise drowned Broglie in an empty part of the prison after they'd been smuggled into the building somehow. I had no choice but to tell my wife that yes, if it was the same Vincent Muhlbeck, I had spoken to him that night, but I wouldn't give her the details. I assured her I was leaving Lenore and on my way back home, and that nothing out of the ordinary had happened here, and that I would explain everything later.

Back in the car, I cruised slowly toward the north side of town, pointing the camera through the windshield as I drove, just to get whatever very rough shots I could. I wasn't going to have the fortitude to do my usual two or three remotes here. I would come back later, maybe, during the day, with a friend, but most likely my adventure in Lenore was over. Still I saw no one on the streets until in the north part of town, which was entirely residential. I could make out two people running across the road ahead of me, far in the distance, from one side of the street to the other, and then out of sight. About two minutes later a car came in the other direction, and it visibly slowed as it approached me. I actually sped up, very unnerved. I glanced to my left as I passed the car, but I couldn't see inside it. When I saw that it had stopped completely, I took an immediate right turn and sped up. The car didn't follow. Another left took me into a more wooded area. I didn't want to turn around, so I kept going. I realized I could easily get lost.

I tried taking one more right and found myself in a very quiet part of town, all single-story houses and a private school. A cemetery came up on my left, or more accurately a gravel path that led back into it, and I assumed this was Crown Point Cemetery, a photo of which adorned the cover of *The Town With Many Eyes*. It was the one story in the book I was familiar with, having read it on some website. This one actually had a little validity to it, since there were newspaper sources to back it up. I turned into the cemetery, which had no gate. I bumped along the gravel very slowly, going past wildly uneven rows of very old tombstones, some probably dating back to the Revolutionary War. The cemetery would have been quite ugly during the day and was more so at night, pockmarked with random rises and depressions, scraggly weeds, unkempt grass. The path went back about a quarter of a mile and stopped abruptly.

The tombstone I wanted to look at was reportedly taller than all the others; otherwise I never would have found it, it being set about twenty feet off the path. There was nothing remarkable about its design; only, supposedly, its inscription. I stopped the car in the middle of the path, killed the headlights, grabbed my flashlight and the camera again, and got out. I felt confident no one was around. The tombstone belonged to a man named Curtis Palliser, the man who had founded Lenore. As soon as the beam of my flashlight fell across the front of the stone, I saw that in this one case legend was actually truth.

I read the inscription twice before I took some shots of it for the episode. Keeping in mind that Palliser had been an importer of impeccable reputation during his life, with not a single whisper of any wrongdoing, this is what I read: *God pity his soul and forgive him for his wretched deeds / and let men be watchful that he does not stir / from his slumber beside the beast. Born 1780, died 1867.* That was it. Palliser's original tombstone had been secretly replaced by persons unknown sometime in the seventh winter after his death, and there for some reason this one had stayed. Since then no one had ever uncovered a single plausible story from the past to bring shame to his name, not one. Yet there was the inscription, and no protest enough from anyone to remove it.

A couple of snow flurries landed on my hands as I hiked out of the cemetery. Back inside the car I tried to find a weather report, but every station seemed to be speaking from under a

blanket of static, and I gave up. I snaked down a road where more working-class houses stood. There was one whose front door was wide open, leading into total darkness, and one where a Doberman pinscher stalked across the lawn slowly, tracking my car until I was out of sight. I turned onto Kingman Street. My headlights picked something out in the road up ahead. It was a human body.

I pulled over and left the engine running and ran out. I knew the man was dead already. The trail of dark blood that ran from him flowed all the way to the side of the road. He lay face down on the pavement. I turned him over and saw that he had been stabbed at least a dozen times through his sweatshirt. He was about fifty years old, his eyes open and staring. Kingman was an unusually dark road. Houses were on each side. I let the man go and ran toward the first one I saw. There was a single light on inside, a feeble one, so I knocked on the door several times, trying not to make it too forceful lest I scare the people in there. There was no answer, and the windows on the lower floor were just too high for me to see into.

I left the house and ran across a driveway to the next one. There didn't seem to be much life in there either, but I had to try. Again, though, there was no answer to my constant knocking. The fact that there were two cars in the driveway told me there must be someone home, so I moved to my left and raised myself on my toes to see into the living room. What I saw there sent me around the back of the house in a frantic attempt to find some way in. I climbed over a short chain-link fence and crossed a small back lawn to a large porch where a grill sat uncovered. The back door was ajar. Without thinking, I went right in. I found myself in the kitchen of this house. There were lights on in here. I saw dishes in the sink. Beyond that was the living room, and another body.

It was a woman sitting in a rocking chair. On the TV set in the corner, the DVD menu for a documentary about the Civil War played on and on. The woman had no visible wounds, but I have never seen a look of terror like I saw on her face, which had gone almost utterly white. Her hair was cocked at a strange angle, strands of it thankfully obscuring her eyes. I didn't know how long she had been dead. There was something on the wall behind the television, something scrawled there in what looked like black paint. From a distance it might have passed for an accidental blotch, but looking a little closer, it was obvious that I was looking at a crude drawing of a dead tree. It was meant to be little more than a silhouette. It stretched from about chest level almost all the way to the ceiling. That was it, nothing more. I looked for a phone there only briefly. When I didn't see one in the living room or the kitchen, I ran out the back door again, frightened of spending a single moment more in that house.

But outside was no better, for the feeling of being watched was constant now. I ran through the back yard and climbed over the rear section of chain-link fence onto the next property. There were more lights on in the house in front of me than any other I had seen. I tore across the back yard, nearly snapping my foot when it came to rest on the edge of a rabbit hole. There was no back porch, just a back door, and I turned the knob before even knocking. It was open. Just like the house across the way, the kitchen was the first room upon entry. Everything seemed very neat and clean. I called out for someone, but there was no answer. The contents of the living room suggested someone here was moving in or out soon: lots of things in crates and boxes. The television set was dark. I called out again. No answer.

The sense that something was horribly wrong here as well sunk into me quickly, almost a physical sensation in my chest, in my lungs. I went to the staircase in the corner of the room. It was unlit. I found the courage to start up the stairs, but I couldn't bring myself to call out any

longer. It scared me too much to make any sound at all. Even my quiet footsteps on the stairs as I climbed them was too much. I stopped when I saw a very small streak of paint, black paint, that had smudged a corner of the wall at the staircase's blind turn. Sensing how dark it was up there, I turned on my flashlight, and then I just stood on the third step with my back to the wall, trying to control my breathing, for a full minute.

There was no way, I thought, no way I could go up the rest of those stairs, but it was at about that point that I became someone different, someone almost un-recognizable to myself. Some bizarre primal need to see what was up there took over despite all my common sense. It was like an out-of-body experience. The belief that I was so close to death, my own death, actually pushed me closer towards it. I turned the blind corner, and there were six more steps ahead of me. I had to use the flashlight now to see. The beam shone up into the hallway above, and before I even took one more step it caught a bare human foot just beyond the top one. The rest of the body was hidden from view behind the near wall. When I got to the top of the staircase, the rest of the image came into view. It was a woman, lying face down. She had been moving toward the bathroom at the end of the hall when she'd fallen from her wounds, or maybe been pinned down while they were inflicted. I turned the flashlight to my left, toward the bedroom she'd obviously come from. The door was open. I walked toward it. It was pitch black in there. I no longer cared, or even minded. My reality had become so nightmarish that I was treating it all like a nightmare, something unreal.

I crossed the threshold into the room. This time the killer, or killers, had painted the tree above the headboard of the bed. There had been a terrible struggle. A lamp had been knocked over; the sheets were completely off the bed; the headboard itself had been dislodged and broken. In the end, the man inside the bedroom had been overwhelmed. He was in one corner of the room, below an open window. There was more black paint there. The date had once again been written in rapid and almost illegible slashes. Through the window I could see the upper windows of the house beside this one. All this was obscured by a foul odor of something burning, or having been burned. It was stronger near the corner, where the body lay. I trained the flashlight there again, longer this time, and moved closer.

What I beheld was an impossibility. The dead man's skin had been charred black from head to toe, including his hands and his bare feet, but his clothing was not even partially singed. He wore a Tennessee Titans sweatshirt and gray sweatpants. None of it was damaged, yet he himself, as if the victim of some kind of spell, had been utterly immolated. No stab wounds either. Only some freakish burning. Something else: he'd been holding something in his right hand when he died, still clutching it tightly. It was a knife, but one unlike I had ever seen. Double-bladed, almost as if the blades were fangs, and thick, eight inches or more in length, with a wooden, carefully carved handle. I supposed he had meant to use it but never got the chance.

I did not even run out of the house. I went down the stairs with one more glance at the dead woman and walked out the front door as if I lived there, and I crouched on the lawn and looked off at the body that was still lying in the middle of the road. I wanted to lie down in the grass and close my eyes and never wake up. But I forced myself back on my feet and toward the road. My car was still idling, I saw. I had left it running all this time. No one had taken it; no one had touched it. I was truly alone after all. I got in and threw the car into reverse. I turned completely around and started driving back the way I had come, but my mind had no conception of where I really was. I couldn't focus at all, so I drove blind, forgetting completely the turns I had made to get here. I just drove. On the fronts of two consecutive houses on Windbale Lane, images on

trees had been scrawled. It slowly came to me in little pieces, the rumor and gossip I hadn't processed correctly before. Two cults, the newspapers used to claim, and not only were they not aligned, they were at war with one another. All nonsense, all of it, none of it proven, none of it understood. The sort of urban legend that took hold in a quiet town and eventually died.

I finally saw a real living being in Lenore well past midnight. One street over from the silent bay, someone was sitting on a swing in a children's playground beside a day care center. At first I just saw a shape, and then the outlines of a face under the glow of a weak nearby streetlight. I pulled the car over to the curb and killed the engine. The person sitting on the swing didn't even look in my direction. I got out of the car and just stood for a moment fifty feet away from the playground. The man and I, for I could see now it was a man, looked at each other. I finally dared to approach him, crossing the sidewalk and moving past a jungle gym. I told him I needed some help. He looked at me blankly, not responding, as I walked towards him. He was a man of middle age, well dressed. I barely heard him ask me in a low voice if I was Christian Barrett.

I stopped. When I asked him if he was Vincent Muhlbeck, he nodded slowly. I asked him what had happened here. I am now trying to remember his words as best I can. To my first question his response was only that Palliser's children had lost, and that tonight 'the tree would rise again.' To my question about whether he had called the police and if someone was coming to help, he merely shook his head and said it didn't matter now. I didn't know what to ask next. Before I could venture another word, he stood up from the swing and advised me not to get back in my car, that it was best not to be seen. He said it would all be over soon enough, but I might be able to make it out of town if I wasn't seen. To this he added that he was sorry he was too late in coming here, and then he lifted his right hand to his mouth, and he put something in it, something very small, and he swallowed it.

A second later he collapsed where he stood, all at once as if he had been shot. He emitted a sick cough when he struck the ground. His left leg pounded again and again on the patch of dirt in front of the swing that had been worn away from the impact of so many children's feet, and his body twisted as if something were climbing up his spine and he were trying to shake it off, and then suddenly he lay still, dead on the ground before me. I did not touch him, did not try to revive him. I knew it was useless. My decision as to where to go next was made for me when I looked down the street. In the pool of yellow light thrown by a streetlamp a hundred yards away, I saw two dark figures running in my direction. One of them was holding some long thin object in its right hand. There was not even enough time to make it back to my car. So I turned and ran across the playground into the darkness toward the empty ball field behind it.

I made it far farther than I thought I could. When my lungs felt like they were going to seize up in the cold, sheer adrenalin took me forward. At no point as I ran across a faded baseball diamond into the woods at the end of the field did I look behind me. Only when I tripped over a heavy stone and slammed into the ground did I stop, roll over, and look through the trees at the stretch I had crossed. I saw no one. They had given up. Once again I was alone in Lenore. This time I was in a place where no one could see me, and that's where I wanted to stay. I lay on the ground, my face pressed into the frost, for a couple of minutes, and then I got to my feet and headed deeper into the woods that bordered the bay. I wasn't sure where I was walking. It didn't seem to matter. It was just enough to be off the streets, out of sight. My mind was working well enough to check my cellphone once again in the futile hope I'd get a signal. Again there was nothing. I didn't have my flashlight with me, and the woods were thick even in the middle of winter. I stumbled forward, trying to keep my mind a blank. My night vision brought everything more and more into focus. The stars were perfectly clear above me. They shone enough light

that I could make little things out—initials carved onto a fallen log, an empty soda bottle lying beside a stick shaped like a W. These were the things around me when there came a sound that stopped me.

The wind had just risen unexpectedly, colder than ever, when I heard a low moaning that seemed to be coming from ahead and behind. This moaning became something more within seconds. It was as if the earth itself was in pain. It rose and rose, and I looked all around me desperately. Another layer of sound emerged, something I must describe as a voice because there's no other way to describe it. Low, angry, and bellowing, one unending cry of rage. It got so loud I put my hands over my ears and cried out. Maybe two hundred feet before me, a giant shrieking mass of darkness was rising toward the sky. Something that was growing rapidly, reaching upwards, dwarfing everything around it. It was a tree, ten times wider than any other in the woods and sprouting a thousand branches, sprung up from nothing. As I stood there screaming, the sound of its rage crushing whatever I could summon, the tree began to shake as it grew and grew, those long branches waving and cracking violently. I remember a bright star suddenly disappearing as the tree's upper reaches blocked it, so high now that within a minute it would scrape the clouds. I felt blood come out of my ears and trickle down each cheek as my eardrums burst. The monster's branches lashed out, and I saw several of them snap off with the force of its deafening quaking, falling to the ground below like people hurling themselves off a high ledge to their deaths. The unearthly roar must have traveled for miles. I felt it seize my spine, and I collapsed to the ground, certain I would be dead in a moment.

The tree began to bend to the left and right as if it were trying to rip itself free of the ground. I saw a branch the height of a low airplane descend toward me, striking the trees that protected me and snapping in three pieces before falling out of sight. Then, only about fifty feet off the ground, the most awful sight of all: clinging to the tree that wrenched itself in all directions as if buffeted by a windstorm were humanlike creatures that proved to be actual humans, naked and streaked in filth. They were attempting to slither down the tree towards the ground. They were all over the tree, climbing downwards in fits and starts as they could manage, reaching out and grasping the bark with pale hands, adhered to the trunk somehow. Even so, among the dozens of bestial humans borne from the tree, I saw three or four of them flung off, losing their grip and falling into the darkness. One fell from a height so vast it appeared in the sky tumbling downwards as if from nowhere. I was on my knees, my hands clawing my face, my lungs stripped from shrieking, when everything went mercifully black. The last thing I felt was a single leaf blown by the wind striking the corner of my mouth. Such a minute detail tells me how real it all truly was, so that now, as I sit in the basement of my house, writing this down, I have confidence that I am not at all insane.

They found me on the side of Loon's Neck Road, two miles outside of Lenore. I spent a day in the hospital recovering from my injuries, telling no one my story until it was forced out of me by the police, who consider me a prime suspect in the Lenore murders. There were fourteen people killed, an alert reporter discovering that all of them were descendants of Curtis Palliser. The killings were obviously the work of many, of whom they think I may have even been the leader. I told them everything except what happened in the woods. I don't think they even believed me when I told them that Vincent Muhlbeck had committed suicide. The memory of his face when he took that pill is what most makes me believe that whatever happens to me is immaterial. The world itself may end soon enough for all I know. Something's been released; something has grown. There may be no monstrous thing in the woods visible to the human eye, but that doesn't mean anything. The truth was there with what Muhlbeck did. Or maybe it'll just

be Lenore that's stricken. That's something to hope for, though when I wake up from my nightmares it feels more likely that winter won't ever be leaving any of us.

outcast

My name is Robert Tathala. This is the story of Garrett Markish, a junior at Telford High School in Telford, Missouri, when I was a senior, in the year 2004. What happened with Garrett Markish can be compared of course to the story of the Columbine Massacre and others in which the rage of a young man burst forth in a nightmarish way against his classmates, but it is also a story like no other in history. Because I knew Garrett and his fate became so intertwined with mine, I feel I am most able to speak about the days leading up to the tragedy that killed seventy-seven people on the night of May 5th of that year.

Garrett Markish appeared at our school three weeks into my senior year, and right away he met the profile of the loner and the outcast, the type who has so much trouble navigating through the high school years without being bullied or emotionally abused in some way. Garrett was very thin, kind of short, with long black hair. He had very soft features, making him appear somewhat effeminate. His clothes were usually mismatched, not that he ever made much of an effort in that department, usually wearing the same thing most days: old jeans and a plain t-shirt. He drifted through the halls looking like he wanted to be anywhere else, speaking to virtually no one. At lunch he usually went to the library or sat by himself on the hill overlooking the football field where some kids congregated to smoke. I would sometimes see him out there reading a book, usually science fiction as I recall. I'd heard he played the guitar a little and listened to goth music. You couldn't call him nerdy; he was merely alone and disinterested in human contact.

I never had a class with Garrett, though from what my friends told me he sat silently writing in a notebook in every one, volunteering nothing, doing the work when he felt like it, not bothering when he didn't. As someone who'd been bullied a little back in elementary school, I could identify with Garrett and felt bad for him, as did any student with a conscience, but like most people seventeen or eighteen years old, I was too selfishly caught up in my own life to think much about him. If I saw him coming down the hallway toward me, I would nod, getting one in response about half the time. Sometimes I considered talking to Garrett, but for whatever reason I just never did.

I suppose it was inevitable that at some point some insensitive student would start to cause a problem for Garrett. It was a little after Halloween of 2003 that Kirk Neavitt, a senior and a reserve player on Telford High's basketball team, started in with Garrett. I wasn't sure exactly how it began; apparently Kirk had asked a rude question of Garrett between classes and didn't like the response. He'd shoved Garrett up against a locker and walked away before any teachers

walked past. From that point on, Kirk adopted a pet nickname for Garrett that was ridiculously profane. He and I didn't mix in the same circles, so I wasn't privy to the daily interaction between the two, but I knew they had a class together, American government, and they sat in the same row, separated by two students. Eventually Kirk took to shooting the occasional spitball at Garrett and referring to him as Doctor Frankenstein, a misguided and vague reference to the kinds of books Garrett sometimes carried around with him: old dusty things with no jackets, the contents of which were a mystery.

On December 19 there was a real incident. They were in class, and Kirk had thrown a pen at Garrett when he thought Mr. Harrison wasn't looking. This time Garrett took it and fired it back, hitting Kirk right in the eye. Kirk erupted, and Mr. Harrison took both of them outside in the hallway. The students in the classroom could hear Kirk's protests as he was chastised. Garrett returned to the class, but Kirk didn't. It's almost hard for me to believe sometimes that someone could be so childish, so hurtful, but that was Kirk Neavitt. There were rumors that there would be a fight, but nothing developed, thank God. Even in 2003 the word 'fight' in a public high school could mean something pretty scary sometimes.

Fiona Beloit, a girl I'd known since elementary school, was in that American government class, and she told me she was a little unnerved by Garrett's reaction to Kirk's taunting. He'd never acknowledged it once, just completely ignored the spitballs and the laughter, until the thing with the pen. When Garrett returned to class, he spent the last fifteen minutes of the period silently opening and closing his right hand into a claw on the top of his desk, slowly and almost methodically, over and over again, like a robot, as if we wasn't even aware of it. He was staring out the window and never looked away from it. He was out of school the next two days and then came back. There had been no suspension for Kirk, and so he was back too. Garrett's locker was defaced with profanity a week later, a typically immature move by Kirk. And that was where things seemed to leave off when Christmas break came on the 23rd of December.

I got a call from a friend of mine on the 29th telling me that Kirk Neavitt was missing and had been since the 26th when he'd gone out to meet some friends at the Redstone Mall. It made the front page of the local newspaper the next morning. My father was a detective for the Missouri State Police, and he became involved in the search for Kirk, and I tried to give him some background about the little I knew about him—who he hung out with at school, that kind of thing. I told him Kirk was a bit of a troublemaker, and that led to me telling him about Garrett Markish.

The last anyone had seen of Kirk, he was looking at the show times outside the movie theater box office near the mall food court. That was at eight o'clock on the 26th. His friends said he never showed up to meet them on the other side of the mall. Kirk lived just a half-mile away and had no car. It was so strange, seeing his face on the local news. His parents were shown too, and they looked more visibly upset than I had ever seen real people on TV. At dinner on the 29th my father told me that there had been no history of problems in the household, and he and his partner on the case, Burt Dale, didn't know of any obvious reason Kirk should leave home. His grades had even been pretty good, and he was intending to enroll at the local community college. There were virtually no leads. He had simply vanished. I mentally steeled myself for the return to school and the sad atmosphere that would greet us all.

At 5:30 on the morning of December 31st, one of Telford High's janitors entered the school to start preparing it for a major snowstorm that was forecast for the area that night. Part of his task was to check and alter the thermostat settings all around the building. He walked through

the dark hallways, checking them off one by one, and at one point decided to cut through the library, a huge centrally constructed room that was bordered on all sides by the four upstairs hallways. As he went through it in the dark, he heard something off to his right, a soft voice that startled him. It was a male voice, repeating something again and again. The janitor followed it over to a sidewall. He was shocked to see someone lying on a long countertop near a copy machine. It was a student, soon to be identified as Kirk Neavitt.

Kirk was lying on the countertop, physically unhurt, though it became obvious that he had been lying there for what might have been several days. During that time, apparently, he had never moved. He had not eaten and had very noticeably lost weight, as if intentionally starved. Beside his head was a small blue plastic bowl, a dog dish. It was half-filled with lukewarm water. Kirk lay face up, repeating a single phrase again and again, quietly, to no one. He stopped speaking when the janitor roused him out of his strange stupor, but he said nothing more to anyone for another twenty-four hours, at which time he finally began to emerge from the strange waking coma he'd been trapped in. His logical memories ended with walking toward the Redstone Mall on the 26th. There were no signs on his body of being bound or restrained in any way.

As the police interviewed Kirk further in the hospital and he became more and more coherent, nursed and fed slowly back to full health, he started to recall unusual things, like being asked, not commanded but asked by a soft male voice, to lie down and remain in place, not moving a muscle unless he had to turn his head to drink. His impressions of what happened between lying down and the time he was discovered were patchy and confused. Something had happened in his mind that made him too weak to move. Whenever he had tried, he had barely been able to raise his arm an inch off the countertop. He had never felt afraid, just slowly more and more disinterested in trying to get up. His rational thoughts had been replaced by a thick mental fog in which he'd forgotten his own name. He had a vague recollection of the lights around him being turned on and off once or twice, but he had no memory of ever being touched. Only his dreams had been vivid, dreams of floating above town, and bizarrely, of walking through its deserted streets in the middle of the night killing spiders that appeared around every corner by the dozens. These dreams in particular had seemed to go on and on and on. Most of these details never made the newspaper, which reported only that Kirk had been found inside the school but didn't say how he'd gotten there.

Kirk did not return to school that year, kept at home while he underwent several evaluations, physical and psychological. It was from my father again that I learned that there would most likely never be any explanation for why he had lain on that countertop, slowly starving, for five days. He told me that whoever had led him there and left the room while he lay still must have returned a couple of times to refill the water dish, or Kirk would have died of thirst. They'd searched for signs of forced entry, but there were none. Unfortunately the police found three different ways to enter the school without breaking any lock. My father rarely tried to hide anything from me, and it was he who told me what Kirk had been saying to no one, over and over again, when the janitor approached him in the dark. He'd been saying, *'The shed will fill with the baby's blood.'* It was utter nonsense. They tried and tried, apparently, to link that phrase to something, but never did. I've never been able to get that sentence out of my head.

It was more than two weeks after Kirk was found that my father finally went to talk to Garrett Markish. The case was going nowhere, and my father, as he sometimes did with the cases that baffled and fascinated him, was more or less going out on his own to try to understand more

about what had happened. I remember it was a Thursday night that he came back to the house unusually late, around ten o'clock. I was in the kitchen cutting myself a piece of cake. My mother and my twelve-year-old brother were upstairs; he was teaching her a spreadsheet application for her job in a publishing house. My father sat down next to me at the kitchen table and told me where he'd been.

Garrett lived in a foster home, the oldest of four kids who lived there. This was the third foster home he'd lived in. His parents had died in an accident when he was two. My father told me he'd spoken to Garrett for an hour, and though he had no evidence that he'd had anything to do with Kirk Neavitt's bizarre disappearance and reappearance, he wanted me to stay far clear of him. I would have taken my father at his word about this with no complaint, since I knew he had developed and honed a sense of someone being bad news that the rest of us just didn't have, but he made a particular emphasis of his point that night. Nothing, he said, was right about Garrett Markish, and I especially was not to antagonize him in any way. I said I understood, a little disappointed that my father would think I would ever do such a thing. Looking back, I think that wasn't his point at all. He'd only been trying to emphasize how very dangerous Garrett was without being able to put the specifics into words.

Word got out well enough about what had really happened to Kirk Neavitt, and the students of Telford High did look at Garrett differently then. You could sense that people made a specific point of avoiding him rather than just ignoring him. I don't recall anyone, even my friends, speaking openly about the possibility that Garrett had somehow caused Kirk's affliction, but it hung there all the same. There was no way this weak stick figure of a kid could have intimidated Kirk into accepting that bizarre torture, yet the aura that surrounded Garrett from that point on was palpable. It was said that Kirk had a long way to go to make a full psychological recovery, that he'd developed an intense fear of the dark and falling asleep with no one else in the room. There was a rumor that Garrett alone was the reason Kirk wanted to stay out of school, but this had no basis in fact from what I knew.

Garrett himself missed a week of school in February, supposedly with the flu. One afternoon during that stretch, I was in the English wing walking down the hallway toward a meeting of the yearbook club when I detected a strong odor, a sour, almost rancid smell. Another student, a 10th grader named Jeremy Vogt, was walking a little behind me, and when I turned and involuntarily made a face he was doing the same. A math teacher, Mr. Bush, came out of his room up ahead of us and asked us if we smelled something bad. It was an inadvertently funny question, since the odor was almost overpowering where he was. There was a long bank of lockers across the hallway from his room, and grimacing, the three of us traced the odor to a specific section of lockers. Mr. Bush opened the ones that were unlocked, seeing nothing in any of them that was of any concern. He said he was going to find one of the janitors and ask if there was a way to get into the three or four lockers that were the most likely suspects.

Jeremy Vogt walked off, heading home, losing interest and more than a little revolted, but instead of going on to my meeting, I actually waited for Mr. Bush to return. I knew that Garrett Markish's locker was right in front of me. I remembered seeing it after it was defaced by Kirk Neavitt. I hoped Mr. Bush wouldn't shoo me away, but he never even asked afterwards why I'd hung around to see the outcome of the mystery. So I was alone there in the hallway for a minute. The regular school day had ended a half hour before, so no one walked past. The odor was unlike anything I had ever sensed, an odor of rot and smoke. I reached out to Garrett's locker, feeling a definite sense of trespass, that I was doing something wrong. Still, I closed my hand around the padlock that guarded it and then gave it a meaningless tug, duplicating the one Mr.

Bush had given it. Of course it held firm. Then I idly began to rotate the dial, continuing to tug on the padlock lightly as I cycled just once through ten numbers or so. All of a sudden the lock gave cleanly. Like I sometimes used to do when I was impatient, Garrett had snapped the lock tight but then given the wheel only a quarter turn, having no reason to think anyone would want in. Looking back once over my shoulder down the hallway, I opened the locker.

Inside was the usual profusion of random papers and even a bag of some incredibly old Oreo cookies. But then there was the jar. It was a small thing with a Smuckers Grape Jam label still on it, half torn away, though those contents had been washed out some time ago. I took the jar into my hand and looked at what was inside. For a moment I thought what I was seeing was a miniature from some role-playing game; Garrett certainly seemed the type to be into something like that. It was a tiny black and gray dog figure, intricately sculpted and painted from the look of it. Because it looked so strange and because I wanted to determine if it was the sole cause of the odor, I unscrewed the lid of the jar. I winced and turned my face away immediately; this object was clearly the *only* cause. I stared at it harder and had such trouble believing my eyes that I felt compelled to put a finger into the jar in order to touch the dog.

You must imagine what a Doberman pinscher would look like if it died or were killed and left in the woods for a couple of days, or more accurately, mummified. Then imagine it was only two inches long. The sculpture, or whatever it was, had incredibly tiny but complete features, including sealed eyes. Its little mouth was frozen in a snarl with one tiny fang protruding. My finger touched the side of its body, and I felt a fur-like substance. The body gave ever so slightly when I pushed down on the exposed side, as if it were stuffed. I felt a wave of horror and disgust then, and would have sworn in court that I was sure what I was touching had once been a living thing. I screwed the lid back on the jar and put it back in the locker. Disgustedly I wiped my fingers again and again on my shirt.

Mr. Bush returned after only another minute, and I told him I had managed to open the locker. Thinking of fingerprints, I confessed I had touched everything and was sure the jar was the cause of the odor. Then I walked quickly away, not telling him I had really gotten a good look at anything in particular. He mumbled a word of thanks to me and said he'd see me tomorrow. And that was the last I knew of that jar or Mr. Bush's reaction to it when he almost certainly opened it as I had. Instead of continuing to my yearbook meeting, I simply went home, feeling ill.

That night I went back and forth about telling my father what I had seen in the locker. I finally did as he sat in his easy chair reading a John le Carré novel. He listened attentively and questioned me on several details that seemed unimportant to me but that to his detective's mind were quite the opposite. He asked me how old the jam label was, and what sort of dog that sculpture represented, and if I remembered if the papers in the locker were schoolwork or something other than that. He reminded me once again about my promise to steer clear of Garrett, which from now on included his things. I apologized for opening the locker and told him frankly that my curiosity had just plain overpowered me. He said he could understand that. I said goodnight and turned to walk up the stairs to my room. Halfway up he stopped me and asked me one more thing, which was if there had been any writing on the jar, or maybe any unusual symbols written by hand. I told him no. That was where we left off. Garrett returned to Telford after his bout with the flu, and I never heard anything more about the incident. I had my chances to ask Mr. Bush about what he had done with the jar, but I never did. Even speaking of Garrett gave me an eerie feeling.

It was toward the end of March that I had my one and only real encounter with Garrett. Since winter he'd only retreated further and further into his own world, which was fine with everyone, but made me increasingly nervous. Once out at the movies with my friends someone made a reference to a serial killer character in the film we'd just seen and drew a lazy parallel to Garrett, and not only did I not laugh, but I wondered aloud if I was the only one who was genuinely worried about what he might do. More and more when I saw him I would notice little details about his increasingly disheveled appearance, like his habit of wearing the exact same thing all the time and not shaving, that sort of thing, or a new tattoo I noticed on his neck. I couldn't imagine there wasn't more concern about him being a real threat to either himself or all the rest of us.

My friends became quiet for a brief moment, and then Rich Griffin, kind of a genius who would at twenty-one drop out of college to be hired as a full-time reporter for the *New York Times*, said he thought about this all the time, and he knew that a teacher in the English department—he felt uncomfortable, he said, about telling us which one—felt so much the same that she was in occasional meetings with the principal about what could be done legally to possibly intervene in Garrett's life. Then Mike Beck, whose left arm would be crushed forty days later in the stampede resulting from the massacre that Garrett would perpetrate, told us he had gotten so nervous about Garrett that he'd found himself approaching him and asking him if he'd like to join the school's filmmaking group that occasionally made short videos for Internet streaming. He thought maybe Garrett was the creative type; he'd heard he played guitar. Garrett had only muttered no thanks, and Mike had dropped it. It was clear that I wasn't the only one musing upon Garrett and mentally tracking his withdrawal from his fellow students, but it didn't make me feel any better.

March 21, the first day of spring, was cold and rainy. I drove my mother's station wagon to school that day so I could come home late from the library, buried as I was in a term paper about the life of George Mason. I got antsy there after only an hour or so and decided to leave around five thirty, near dusk. Driving home down Elm Tree Road, I saw Garrett walking down the side of the road in the rain, without an umbrella. I suppose I had Mike Beck's story of how he had tried to reach out to Garrett still firm in my mind, and I directly violated my father's trust by pulling over to the curb, stepping out of the car, and asking Garrett if he wanted to ride with me wherever he needed to go. Or maybe there was something darker in my motives; maybe it was more about a gnawing curiosity and a desire to look into this kid's eyes and truly see whether he was good or, just maybe, something unclassifiable. And yes, I think now there was an element of selfishness in it, an element of self-preservation. I wanted to be on this person's good side; there's no real doubt about it. I was honestly scared of him, and I wanted him to think of me as something other than one of *them*, the kids who either ignored him or mocked him behind his back.

To my surprise, he murmured an unenthusiastic acceptance of my offer and got into the car. As we pulled away from the curb, I asked him where he was walking from, and he said the music shop. I told him I'd heard he played guitar, but he only shrugged and said he did sometimes but he wasn't that interested in it anymore. We drove in silence for a time through the rain. He said he was only headed toward a friend's house and that I could drop him off at the entrance to Forbes Park, which was a dumpy grouping of athletic fields bordering a residential community. I offered to drive him to the front door of his friend's house, whoever that might have been, but he said no, he didn't want to get there too early and would just read for a little bit at the bus shelter in front of the park. I didn't persist. I asked him what kinds of things he liked to read, and he recited the names of a couple of science fiction authors I knew and some philosophers I

definitely did not. I managed to catch some details of his recent tattoo, the one he'd gotten on the side of his neck. It was small but clear, its colors dark blue and gray and black. It depicted a hooded figure that appeared to be holding a lantern in an outstretched arm.

In just a couple of minutes we were at the park, and I swung in and he thanked me quietly and got out of the car. What happened next I saw only because my attention remained partially on Garrett as he closed the car door and started walking toward the bus shelter about thirty feet away across a small grass divider patch in the lot. I kept watching him because I was about to say, 'See you at school,' in the friendliest tone I could muster. Otherwise I would have already turned my head to look through the windshield and would have completely missed the occurrence, which I only caught out of the corner of my eye, and I swallowed the words I meant to say and started to focus my attention elsewhere. On Garrett's seventh or eighth step away from the car, I heard, very vividly, the sound of a heavy slap, as if a person's closed fist had connected with another's flesh, and I saw Garrett's head rock to the left side as if struck hard by a stone thrown in his direction. His stride was actually interrupted by the blow, and I would swear that he instantly made the decision to simply absorb it without letting on to anyone who might be watching that anything out of the ordinary had happened. There was not even a glance on his part toward the woods, where something would have to have come from to jolt his head the way it did. He kept walking, not even raising a hand to his head. There was no stone, nothing visible to cause this violence.

As soon as I registered what happened, I called out to Garrett, asking him if he was all right. Without turning around, he merely raised a hand silently and dropped it again as if to say yes. It had all happened in the space of two seconds. I pulled quickly away and turned the car toward the road, my heart pounding. I forced myself not to look back. Again and again in my mind I heard that slap. Only when I turned onto the road did I steal a glance in the rearview mirror, where I saw Garrett pulling a book out of his backpack as he settled himself on the bus shelter's bench. I could see even from that distance that the hair over his right ear was mussed compared to the left. He made no move to smooth it out. It was that dedication to ignoring what had happened that made me think he had no reason to be surprised at being struck, that it had happened before. But what had done it, I would never know. Sometimes I wonder at the timing of the act, how it happened just after Garrett had the simplest of conversations with another human being, a relative rarity for him.

I didn't sleep very well that night; I kept waking up. At a little past two in the morning I decided I was done trying to sleep for a while, and I got up and poked around on the internet for a time, playing some game or the other. Just when I started to feel a little sleepy again at about three, I heard our front door open and close downstairs. I was a little alarmed, as I wasn't sure who this could be coming back home so late on a Thursday night. My father hadn't worked late nights for two years. I assumed my brother Ben was sound asleep in the room beside me; he had no reason to be out either. I threw some sweatpants on and went downstairs to find my father in the kitchen, making himself a sandwich. He was sweating for some reason, quite a lot despite the fact that it couldn't have been more than fifty degrees outside. I asked him where he was coming back from. He said Gregory Gurganus, who used to be his partner some years before, had come up with a tip regarding something my father had been working on, and he wanted to go out and act on it while he had the chance. He said he couldn't tell me more.

I made a great leap of logic in that moment, and unwisely I asked if the tip had anything to do with Garrett Markish. My father had visited Kirk Neavitt twice in the past three weeks, asking him more questions, trying especially to figure out the riddle of the utterance he'd repeated so

many times: *The shed will fill with the baby's blood.* The answer to my own question was no, his trip out that night had nothing to do with all that. My father told me he was very tired and needed to go to sleep, and he would talk to me later. I asked him why he was sweating, and he said he was just wearing one too many layers. And then he went upstairs in the middle of making his sandwich. He just left the meat and the bread out as if he had forgotten what he was doing. I went to bed too, but I lay awake till almost dawn.

The police arrested Garrett the very next morning, as he left his house and started to walk to school. My father was not involved. In fact, he didn't even go to work that day, sleeping quite late. The charge against Garrett was a strange one: theft of an animal. Evidence had been found that Garrett had abducted a dog belonging to a family living three doors down from him. This had apparently happened back in February. The dog had never been found. My father would claim that night when he got back from the precinct house that he knew nothing about any of this. I could tell he was lying. This man who'd dealt with liars all his life was just too honest to be a convincing one himself.

Though I knew everyone at school was aware of what had happened to Garrett—you could read the story's vague details online—I never heard anyone speak of it, bizarre as it was. The silence struck me as forced somehow, as if Garrett's name had finally become verboten. I believe now that he had inadvertently managed to work his way into our collective consciousness in a way that made us all feel so uneasy that talking about him made it far worse. He was a shadow that had fallen across Telford High, and we all just wanted to pretend he no longer existed. There was nothing about him that was darkly exciting to discuss, like with most controversial kids. To the contrary, everything about Garrett was unpleasant to think about, disturbing to muse upon, so all of us, teachers and students alike, went speechless. But his absence from school worried me even more somehow. We knew he'd been arrested, but none of us knew where he was now. I wondered about it constantly. I think if I had known his address I might well have made a detour to simply walk down that street, turning my head in the subtlest way possible as I passed his house to see if I could maybe spot him in a window.

I had a developing sense of dread about him that his absence intensified day by day. I wanted to speak to someone about how I felt something terrible coming, how I'd dreamed one night of being on a train somewhere in the desert, all my classmates sitting around me as we rolled through a dark featureless landscape, and Mr. Bush walking down the aisle between the seats carrying an axe. He was telling everyone to stay calm, for the moment was coming when he would have to stop Garrett from sending the train off the tracks, killing us all. He was asking each one of us how we intended to help him stop Garrett, and when he came to me, he said the way I could best help was to get this mark off his skin, and he pointed to a tattoo on his neck depicting a robed figure holding a lantern in one outstretched arm. When I told Mr. Bush I didn't know how I was going to do that, he told me angrily that it would be my fault, then, when the shed filled with the baby's blood. He held the axe out to me in the dark, demanding I take care of things myself, and it was then that I awoke, crying for the first time in years.

Friday, April 30, 2004, was the day before my father disappeared. I spent the evening at Mike Beck's house, in his basement, helping him paint part of his massive model train layout, something we worked on together once every few weeks. We would put some music on and just chill out with this big crazy project that had no end. His parents were across town, out at dinner. We'd been working for about an hour and a half, and it was a little past nine when all of

a sudden, the power went out. We were in darkness. We laughed nervously. While I waited, Mike went upstairs to find a flashlight, and he noticed through the living room window that none of the other houses on the road had lost their power. It was true. The only sound out there was the neighbor's dog, a temperamental Labrador retriever, barking loudly, which would not normally be a cause for alarm, but which I would remember later on. I thought we should go outside and look up and down the street to see if maybe a crew was working on something nearby. So we went out and looked left and right. We didn't see anything. Back inside, Mike thought about calling his parents to let them know they shouldn't hurry back anytime soon. It was their first night out since their newborn had arrived. They'd left infant Sandra with a sitter. In the end, he didn't make the call. It had now been about twenty minutes total since the power had gone out.

Not sure quite what to do, we returned to the basement and Mike started rooting around for candles. Then something else occurred to him, and we passed through the laundry room to snake our way back through a narrow passageway to the space where the water heater and the fuse box were. Taking a look inside the fuse box, we saw that every single one of them was in the off position, with no exceptions, as if they had all tripped at once. One by one, Mike set them all active again, and lights came back on all over the house. Problem solved. He asked me if I knew how fuses worked, if it was possible that they would all flip simultaneously instead of just one or two. I wasn't sure. I was musing upon it when I saw that Mike's face had gone slack, and he put a hand out to silence me. He said, 'I just saw something outside.' Through the tiny ground-level basement window above our heads he'd seen a pair of legs moving quickly past, maybe a foot beyond the glass.

We moved swiftly out of the laundry room and up the stairs, where we split up and looked through all the bigger windows on the front of the house. Nothing was out there in the side garden, or the driveway, or the street beyond. We then went to the back of the house, into the kitchen. Mike peered out at the porch through the windows set into the back door. Then he froze. He told me that the door to the shed at the edge of the yard was open. He couldn't remember if anyone had left it that way, but it didn't seem like that would have made any sense. He told me to step back toward the refrigerator so neither of us could be seen from out there. We watched the shed for a time from our limited sightline. I could just barely see what Mike was talking about: the door was open just a crack, no more than a foot. Nothing out there moved. As the minutes passed Mike became more and more convinced someone was in there. I offered to call the police, but Mike shook his head. He just wanted to wait a few minutes. I asked him if he was absolutely sure he'd seen someone pass by the basement window, and he said he was about ninety percent sure. Ninety percent.

It was almost ten more minutes before we decided to go out into the back yard. If we got near the shed and something seemed really wrong, we would call the police. Mike was hesitant to turn the light on that illuminated the back porch and not much more. When it was on it actually made the rear of the back yard darker because of the shadows created by that light. We opened the back door and headed out. Mike was holding a hammer he'd scavenged from a drawer, and I held the flashlight. At first we ventured no farther than the back porch. Mike called out, 'Is anyone out there?' To this the only response that came was the barking of the neighbor's dog again. We waited. Nothing stirred. Beyond the back yard the land opened up; everyone in the community had three to five acres to themselves, with very few trees around. Some of the houses beyond had lights on in their windows, some didn't.

The door to the shed was open perhaps eight or nine inches. Mike swore under his breath, mostly, I thought, at his own fear. We moved onto the lawn and slowly moved to within about ten feet of the shed, unable to see much of anything through that crack. It was eerie how in the dark that shed suddenly resembled the entrance to some tomb. Finally Mike strode forward all at once and threw the shed door open wide, yelling out 'Hey!' The door swung all the way on its hinges, creaking loudly; then there was a sharp crack as its arc reached its limit, and it swung all the way back, almost shutting again until I stepped forward and caught it with one hand. I was prepared to rush in there. But the beam of the flashlight fell on nothing more than lawn equipment, a couple of bicycles, and stacks of old magazines.

After that we spread out and covered some ground around the house and in the street, but it all came to nothing. Regrouping back inside, we examined the laundry room and the area around the fuse box. Maybe it had been nothing more than a massively overloaded circuit that had caused the outage and there was nothing to obsess over. Mike didn't want to worry his parents just yet; he would look into it and not say anything. For the rest of the evening, until his parents returned, we watched a movie upstairs, all the lights on, all the doors locked, the volume turned up high. We tried not to think about what had happened. Mike walked me out around 11:30. All he could think about, and he said he knew it was ridiculous, was that Garrett had been at the house that night. He told me about the feeling he'd gotten when making eye contact with Garrett on the day he'd spoken to him about the filmmaking group, a feeling of having made a huge mistake, as if he had trespassed without knowing it, and Garrett suddenly perceived him as a threat. But he would never call the police with so groundless a suspicion. There was nothing to be done right now. After all, was Mike seriously suggesting Garrett had maybe gotten into the house somehow? For what reason, with what plan? No one was on the street when I drove the four blocks home. The few hours of sleep I would get that night would be the most I'd get for months as real, tangible horror came into my life.

My brother was the one who found the note my father had left behind on the kitchen table the next morning. It was Saturday, and Ben came down to eat breakfast before going to work at a Radio Shack in the Telford Mall, and he saw a single sheet of paper tucked beneath a salt shaker. In my father's friendly oversized handwriting were the words *See you later!* written in ballpoint pen. None of us thought anything of it, as on Saturdays he was very likely to go off to the hardware store early to begin some kind of home improvement project. But he wasn't back by noon, and he wasn't answering his cellphone. When night fell and there was still no word from him, my mother called Gregory Gurganus in a panic. He had no idea where my father was. By midnight my mother had taken some sleeping pills to knock herself out so she wouldn't have a breakdown from her worry and stress. My father's friends on the police force, who knew he was happily married for going on nineteen years and thus had no reason to leave us so baffled, went into action right away and did everything they could to find him.

As I lay awake in the middle of the night, the thought that my father had some sort of secret life, or deeply hidden reason for vanishing none of us could hope to understand, was undermined by the more likely scenario that he had gone out on a lead of some kind on a case we didn't know about and had been abducted or killed. Never in his career had he ever given us a sense that he was ever in any sort of real danger, but we knew it was possible. By Sunday night my mother was on prescription medication to control her panic and I and my brother were unable to really eat or sleep. The note my father had left was taken away to be examined with the greatest care, its image burned into our minds.

I didn't go to school Monday or Tuesday as the detectives further investigated my father's disappearance. On Wednesday I retrieved the mail from the box in front of our house and felt on the verge of passing out when I touched an envelope bearing my father's handwriting. It had been postmarked in Los Angeles, California, eighteen hundred miles away, the previous Saturday, which meant it would realistically have to have been sent the same day he'd vanished. Out of sight of my mother I opened the envelope and pulled out a single piece of orange notepaper and a photograph. The note was again written in my father's handwriting. And it said exactly the same thing as the first one: *See you later*, exclamation point. I stared at the photograph for several minutes, shaking. It was a Polaroid he seemed to have taken of himself, holding the camera out at arm's length. He was standing in front of a storefront on a bright sunny day. He was smiling into the camera in an easy, disarming way. He was wearing a football jersey with the number 32. It was the one I'd bought him as a birthday present six weeks before.

That moment was when I knew that Garrett Markish had sent my father away, or rather, convinced him it was time to vanish from his job, his family, his entire life, because he had uncovered too many of Garrett's secrets on his late-night investigations. I imagined Garrett had done it with a single sentence, word, or wave of his hand, summoning a power none of us could conceive of. I knew then that he was a monster. I went to Gregory Gurganus, and in a small spare room at the precinct house where he and my father worked, I told him all of my feelings and all of my suspicions in private. Not even my mother or my brother was there. It was 7 p.m. on May 5th. It took me about a half an hour to lay out all my thoughts to Gregory, who'd been a family friend for ten years. There were legal reasons, he said, why he couldn't tell me everything he and my father had found out about Garrett; in case things escalated, no one could know the lengths they'd recently gone to in order to find out about Garrett's past. There had been no sleep for either him or my father for the past few weeks, he said.

He swore to me right then that my father would be found, and he would be found alive, that Gregory did not think he should wait any longer to act on what he himself suspected. He wanted me to forget about Garrett, go home, be with my mother, and try to resume my life. My father would be found, but it was vital that I act normally and not do anything about what I believed. The search for my father that had begun in Telford would spread to Los Angeles immediately, but the fact that there was no evidence whatsoever of foul play, and that there were now two notes and a photograph seemingly made in a voluntary way by the missing person, would soon make it difficult for the men who knew my father to get the resources they needed. I had no doubt that Gregory would be relentless, but he faced a number of obstacles, and I felt my hopes fading, fading. Within hours it would be found that no one with my father's name had traveled by public jet to California that weekend. And yet he had just appeared there.

From the precinct house I walked that night through downtown Telford toward the nearest bus stop, where I waited for only a few minutes before walking on. I needed to walk, to be unconfined and process my thoughts. I needed miles of moving alone and unseen simply to settle down. It was a warm, pretty spring night. I paid no attention to the traffic, or to the people on the street, though as soon as I moved onto a quieter road I panicked, feeling exposed and watched. I needed to be around people, to lose myself among them. I took a turn onto Marcol Avenue and started to walk a mile and a half toward Telford High, where I knew the state soccer championships were starting, with Telford scheduled to play a 7:30 game against Severn Grove. There would be almost a thousand people there most likely, and for just a while I could drown in the noise and the chaos and the benign meaninglessness of the crowd until I became sane again.

I could hear the Telford band playing their version of an old David Bowie song from two blocks over and see the glow of lights over the houses in the residential neighborhood beside the school. A man and wife were walking with their two young children in the same direction. Soccer was a bigger deal in Telford than football, with the team having won the state finals two years in a row, and lots of people got involved. When I got to the field I paid my three-dollar admission for a ticket at the short brick façade that served as an entrance and went into what was charitably called a stadium. It was really just two giant sets of cheap metal bleacher seats on opposite sides of a chronically muddy football field with a scoreboard on one end and a rising hill on the other where some kids would hang out and watch the game for free.

I sat in the half-filled east-side bleachers that night, climbing twenty rows from the front to a spot all the way in the back so I could disappear more easily. The game was just starting the second half, but I barely registered this, even though I tried to focus and take my mind off its relentlessly grim track. The school building, darkened and somewhat haunted-looking at night, rose behind the west bleachers, where there was a slightly bigger crowd. Over the school the sky glowed a bit from the light pollution coming from the center of town. It was 8:40 p.m. Around me, people who had only twenty more minutes of life on this earth watched the game and chatted and cheered for their friends and their children. I would learn much later that a friend of mine who'd already arranged to be my college roommate come September was sitting directly opposite me in the back row of the west bleachers. He would become one of two people who were never fully found after that night.

Severn Grove had just kicked in their second goal, almost but not quite dashing Telford High's hopes of a repeat championship, when I spotted Garrett on the hill beside the woods on the south side of the field, small in my vision. There were maybe fifteen or twenty people spread out over the hill, watching the game, and Garrett was alone among them, off by himself. He was sitting with his arms draped over his knees and his head hanging down, his face unseen, as if he were asleep. Beside him was his rumpled dark blue backpack. I stared at him, willing him to look up so I could see his face. It took me no time at all to decide that I was going to confront him. I wasn't even surprised to see him; it all made sense somehow. It felt like fate. While the crowd murmured and sighed about the game's tough turn, I stood up, keeping my eye on Garrett. He didn't move. I made my way back down the bleachers to the front row and descended three steps to the ground level and began to walk toward the hill. I was at about the thirty-yard line, and I would have to detour around the chain-link fence that surrounded the field, so it would take me a few minutes to get there.

As soon as I left the bleachers I saw Garrett raise his head and look at the field. He slowly got to his feet as I watched him carefully. It almost seemed like he sensed I was coming and had reacted to my presence. On this night he was wearing a maroon-colored sweatshirt and jeans. The closest people to him were a guy and girl about ten feet away, each drinking something out of Styrofoam cups, unaware that he was behind them. As I kept walking I saw Garrett reach into his backpack and pull out what was obviously a very long, very large knife, its blade probably a foot and a half long, almost a short sword. I broke into a run. Something horrible was about to happen. Garrett raised the blade in front of him and with both hands gripped it, placing the point on his chest. I began to shout then, crying, *'Stop!'* over and over again just so the people around Garrett would look. Someone finally did, a bald man sitting nearby. He began to get up but looked confused about what he was seeing. I had reached the end of the chain-link fence and had gotten to the base of the hill when Garrett started to push that blade into his own chest. I heard a scream then from far behind me as someone in the bleachers saw what I was seeing.

The videotape recovered after the tragedy, which has never been released to the public but which Gregory Gurganus showed me last year after I begged him to, captures the entire scene from beginning to almost the end. It was taken by the assistant soccer coach, Nick Cheadle, who was sitting in the fifth row of the east bleachers so he could get a wider view of the field. It wasn't any sort of official tape of the game he was making that night, so his camera wandered around a lot. When he sensed a commotion around him and saw people pointing toward the slope, he turned the camera that way in time to see Garrett Markish sinking to his knees with the blade sticking out of his chest a quarter of the way in. When you're watching the tape the camera stays on him for only two seconds, very shaky, and then it whips back around to the field, because the screams have taken on a sudden intensity as something begins to happen on the field. The Telford and Severn Grove players have all stopped for a free kick from roughly the field's center point when the ground there opens up. A fissure forms without a sound, and one Severn Grove player is seen to back away from it with his hands high in the air. The fissure grows rapidly, spreading outwards from a central point at about the forty-yard line, creating a wider and wider hole. Nick Cheadle held the camera on the phenomenon as best he could.

As Garrett Markish sunk his blade deeper and deeper into his chest up on the hill, the hole widened and widened. On the tape there is no accompanying noise, no roar or echo. You can hear the thudding of feet on metal as people begin to evacuate the bleachers all around Nick Cheadle, who himself begins to move, continuing to tape until it becomes obvious he's in mortal danger. On the tape you can see the first two Telford players, who had begun to run as fast as they could toward the far sideline, drop into darkness as the ever-widening pit devours the field. They fall in when the pit is about fifty feet by fifty feet wide. As Garrett pushed the last of his blade into his chest and people surrounded him, the pit expanded twice as fast. Screams almost obliterate the tape's audio as it sees more players descend into the sinkhole and clouds of dust rise from it. The last thing you really see of the disaster is the pit spreading to the west, toward the bleachers on that side. That is when the picture becomes too shaky to watch as the man owning the camera abandons the recording and begins to run with the camera in his hand, his breathing labored, the words *'Oh my God, oh my God'* spoken again and again and again.

I had almost gotten to Garrett when I stopped and joined the rest of the people on the hill in helplessly watching the disaster unfold. The people standing on the far sidelines who hadn't already run for safety disappeared into the pit, and then it was under the bleachers, where there were still more than a hundred people who hadn't been able to get down to the steps. I saw people leaping off the bleachers in desperation, but the rickety central part of the bleachers collapsed into the pit all at once, pulling everything else in with it. There was a gigantic plume of dust and debris. Almost lost in the screaming was the moaning of the metal as it buckled. People vanished into the pit, which would tear to an unthinkable depth of one hundred and twenty feet. Many of the deaths were from people falling on others who had already plummeted. Across the field on the east side, where I had come from, there was a stampede into the parking lot, people running as fast as they could into it and beyond it, having no idea what was happening to the earth around them. Almost everyone on the hill had run into the woods, and I went too after taking one glance at the space where Garrett was, face down on the ground, kneeling but motionless, a pool of blood around him. The pit stopped growing suddenly after it consumed the bleachers, and I figure that was when Garrett had technically died. The two happened at the exact same moment, certainly.

I followed people into the woods, into the dark, running as fast as I would, seeing mothers and fathers and students around me, branches scraping them, people tripping and falling as they wept and shouted for one another. We all reached Bottomford Road in about two minutes, and

people there were stopping, feeling it might be safe to rest and collect themselves. They hugged each other and frantically got on their cellphones. One female student was shouting to another that John was in the bleachers, John had never left, and the girl she was babbling at said, 'I know, I know; it's okay.' I turned and looked through the trees. The glare of the lights back there was dimming in an enormous, rising cloud of dust. Everything in that direction was seen only through the haze that blotted out the stars to the north. Telford High itself remained standing, visible as a dark hump under the sky. The sinkhole had stopped growing several hundred feet from the building. Garrett Markish had not lived long enough to destroy it.

More than six dozen people were eventually pulled from that pit. They were all Garrett's victims, though no one will ever be able to prove that. I know it, Gregory Gurganus knows it, and so does my father, who returned to us a month after the massacre, appearing on our front porch one morning. My mother found him sleeping in a plastic chair out there, and when she roused him, he remembered nothing of the previous two months of his life, nor did he remember any of us for several more agonizing weeks. He'd lost forty pounds and suffered severe burns on his back, an infection from which almost killed him. There are many, many others who suspect that Garrett caused it all—Kirk Neavitt's torture, the strange curse placed on a random dog, the events of that hellish May night. Entire books have been written, including one by a Telford High teacher. Engineers and geologists will talk about water tables and fault lines and natural phenomena that can cause sudden tears in the earth, but everyone in Telford certainly believes Garrett Markish was evil. No one knows what his aggrieved foster parents, who never understood him, believe. They've long since moved out of town and can't be found. They let police search Garrett's room after his death, but nothing of value was discovered. It was believed he had cleared everything out of there, destroying all but his most basic possessions, a couple of days before his suicide. The blade he used to do it was traced to a local pawn shop. There was nothing special or unusual about it.

Telford High changed its name to Bellfavor High at the end of my freshman year of college. It was finally reopened then. My father called me to tell me this. He's retired now; he never went back to work after he reappeared on our doorstep. He is still in therapy seven years after Garrett's suicide, a victim of bad dreams and occasional bouts with intense, unexplained stress. He gave up trying to find out what his life was like during his vanishing right after he located a lawyer who believed he had spoken to my father in a park in Los Angeles, where my father had been living day after day in a stupor. People had thought him just another homeless man. This lawyer reported to him that every time he passed on his way to work, my father would make the same seemingly meaningless statement aloud in his direction. The same words sometimes still come to my father in his dreams. He can't seem to shake them. He would say, in a voice weakened by hunger, *'For every grave there is a feeding; for every tomb there is a feast.'* Nonsense words embedded in his mind while his family prayed for his safe return to us. Last night I sat in my tiny apartment here in New York City and wrote those words down on a piece of paper, and then slowly fed it into the tiny flame of a candle—a futile gesture, I know, but it only proves the lengths I and Garrett's living victims will go to in order to somehow bury the past in a hole deep enough so that we can no longer hear the screams.

undead

My name is Frederick April. I am a cinematographer by profession, and was the closest friend of the master film director Thomas Naroth. We worked together throughout college on short films and eventually collaborated on his internationally famous zombie movies, beginning with *Their Billion Hands*, released in 2007. *Their Billion Hands* took Thomas three years to write and shoot. It looked at a zombie plague from the perspectives of eleven different characters in a montage of grisly violence and carefully crafted human drama. The movie was a seamless dazzle, beginning with the plague's freakish beginnings in a condemned Serbian church and progressing through agonizing war room arguments that forced the American government to scorch the earth in desperation. From a paranoid senator with early signs of Alzheimer's to a woman whose hopes for freedom from an abusive husband were pinned on the growing chaos, the characters felt real and their points of view felt unique. Thomas's ultimate thesis was that mortal fear, global upheaval, and anarchy were the universe's naturally cleansing agents, both historically necessary and irrevocable. It was his pure expertise with cinema, though, that offered the moment-to-moment gruesome thrills. His zombies were awful to look at, and their violence was unpredictable, the results of it positively horrifying. The camera had never had such dark fascination with zombie violence and the threatened humanity of those who were forced to engage in it. The ending left viewers queasy with its gore even as it compelled them with its opulence of imagination, as hundreds of the living dead sinking into the ocean grabbed vengefully at the flailing survivors of a gunboat wreck.

With this film Thomas Naroth launched himself to success and stardom, having produced a masterpiece in a genre he had no real interest in other than for its metaphorical value. It became clear to me during the filming that this was a man who could make any story into something memorable through the force of his intellect and his great attention to detail. He became notorious, in a pleasant way, for asking his crew to shoot scenes again and again and again until the nuances he had in mind finally came through on the screen. When it was all over, and all the profits were counted, I expected Thomas to tell me he was ready to start shooting the period drama about the Roman Senate he had been planning for years, or maybe even the romantic comedy set in a declining shopping mall he'd talked about for some time. We went our separate ways for a year or so after *Their Billion Hands* opened, keeping in touch via email about our ideas. To my surprise, Thomas, whose interests included everything from music composition to collecting baseball cards, eventually decided there was more story to tell involving the living dead.

The sequel to *Their Billion Hands* was entitled *The Language Demons Speak*, and it was creative almost to a fault, as much a masterpiece as the first film. This one was set during the height of the zombie plague as the undermanned Third Assigned Army hunkered down on the Maryland/Pennsylvania border in preparation for a fiery assault. Through bad decision-making, hubris, and paralyzing fear, the military minds running the encampment condemned it to a state of siege as thousands of the living dead seemed to prepare their own intelligent counterattack in the surrounding hills. The parallels Thomas drew between this situation and the agonizing days of the U.S. Marines at Khe Sanh were at first subtle, but grew more and more

daringly obvious. The first hour and a half was like a twisting rubber band drawing the tension and suspense tighter and tighter, as evidence of increasing zombie atrocities was shown but the zombies themselves never were. The day-to-day struggles of soldiers trying to keep sane in the face of madness were relentlessly detailed to the point where there seemed little difference between Gladhill, Pennsylvania, and Vietnam. By the time the breaking point came, the men of the so-called 'End Times Unit,' depicted by a cast of unknowns, had become completely rounded, deeply flawed characters whose fate the audience absolutely had to know.

Then came the coup de grace, as Thomas jerked the story sideways into the snow-blanketed hills to follow the relentless progress of a severely wounded zombie whose identity remained a conundrum even after one left the theater. We shot in conditions of zero visibility during the blizzard of 2010. Thomas had me turn the screen into a blindingly white canvas, which made the face of the mystery zombie that much more sinister and expressive. Of course, knowing Thomas so well meant I knew who the zombie really was and what Thomas was trying to say by depicting the entire twenty-minute climactic battle through its perpetually staring eyes, but even if you had guessed wildly wrong, the film's surface genius couldn't be denied. It was a textbook example of great suspense, gut-churning gore, and well-timed gallows humor, as well as a memorable comment on the sick, undeniable allure of war.

None of the extreme weather was simulated with computer trickery, and those of us who endured frostbite and injury later had no regrets about it, though the studio itself never stopped complaining about the budget overruns. They needn't have worried; *The Language Demons Speak* was another huge critical and commercial hit in 2011. Privately I was a little disappointed that during the end of the editing stage, Thomas inserted on the screen a Wallace Stevens quote that seemed to open up the possibility of a third film, making it officially a trilogy. The financial reward for me should a third be shot would be considerable, but I wasn't crazy about an auteur like Thomas spending so much of his early career in this genre. He'd already taken a great deal of time writing and preparing *The Language Demons Speak*. But then, we thought we had our whole lives ahead of us.

In 2013 we shot *The Grave of Terrence Nin*, the conclusion of Thomas Naroth's celebrated zombie trilogy. Against all studio pressure, fan desires, and seemingly solid logic, Thomas chose to close his classic zombie trilogy by reducing the story in both size and scope. The story followed an openly racist white veteran of the infamous battle of Gladhill, which closed the second chapter so memorably, as he made his way via motorized wheelchair to a fabled zombie-free zone in Tennessee. Along the way, his repeated encounters with a single dark-skinned zombie laid the foundation for a brilliantly comedic and ultimately poignant two-man movie as the survivor's tangled moral sense kept him from killing the source of his angst. If you found yourself rooting for the survival of poor dead Terrence Nin, you weren't at all alone: his ultimate fate left so many people in tears upon the film's release that a Best Picture nomination came as no real surprise.

The film's final act brought the overall story arc to a close by introducing a cast of psychologically damaged characters who represented American archetypes corrupted and somehow purified by the three-year nightmare of the living dead's hold upon the land. Their methodical planning for a mass crucifixion as a miracle cure for the plague played out as black comedy given a lingering pathos by the much-talked-about final shot, the one that took us a month to get right, the one I would go on to lecture about to room after room of film students. Held for more than four minutes and involving the complex choreography of over a thousand living dead extras, it gave a careful viewer plenty of time to figure out and appreciate just why Thomas ended the trilogy with this rigorous ballet. What remained in the memory most was

the fearlessness of a filmmaker who took the strangest genre imaginable and used it to create true art, not just once, but three times. The trilogy, I would deign to say, hasn't lost any of its technical magic over the years. It's as brilliant as it ever was.

To my relief, Thomas was finally done with zombies forever, and he actually threw a lavish party to celebrate the fact, retiring to his farm in upstate New York for six months afterward to think about other projects and work on his music, which had always been his second love. I was in great demand as a cinematographer, almost entirely due to the success of the trilogy, and Thomas and I kept in touch over the next few years through occasional emails and phone calls, him always talking up some new idea for a movie that never seemed to get past the script stage, and I very much looking forward to working with him again.

Meanwhile, the temptation for the studio to cash in on Thomas's trilogy was just too great. The French action director Cris-Luc Harrard helmed *Their Billion Hands 4*, and while he wasn't a bad choice, the scriptwriters just weren't up to the task of building upon what had come before. The story picked up at the beginning of a second wave of living dead aggression, the cause of which was complicated enough to require three separate title screens to explain. At least Harrard chose ambition over simplicity, and there was enough in the movie to keep the eyes and ears somewhat occupied for a good hour and a half before it began to lag. A cast cobbled together from the first three films played a U.N. rescue team trapped in the remains of a Rwandan refugee camp while a sea of zombies inexplicably surrounded them. A weeklong project to tunnel to freedom turned into a year of mysterious indecision as the tunnel became a never-ending maze from which no one seemed to have the courage or even desire to emerge. Despite this intriguing premise, the efforts to salute Thomas Naroth's ability to add multiple thematic dimensions to his plots bordered on camp, and Harrard substituted meaningless random zombie attacks for real suspense. The movie was a failure that didn't quite tarnish the trilogy and could be easily forgotten.

The same could not be said for *Their Billion Hands 5*. Everything about this sequel was relatively half-baked, from the wafer-thin plot right down to the zombies' makeup jobs. In this entry, the American government's efforts to quash the living dead involved dropping the occasional nuclear weapon, resulting in widespread fallout that gave birth to a new species of nasties. These walking corpses talked, and even their verbal sludge was usually more interesting to listen to than the human cast, which was headed up by some sitcom star whose performance as a nutty general was compellingly bad. A director of video game eminence translated his skills to the cinema in a mostly indifferent fashion, and the addition of a couple of sex scenes to the proceedings provided much eye-rolling. Based on the relative success of part four in the series, this one hung around for a few weeks in the theaters before vanishing quietly, and we all figured the studio would finally leave well enough alone.

Meeting up with Thomas for the first time in a year at the Cannes Film Festival, we had a couple of drinks, and I could tell he was becoming increasingly bothered by the franchising of this work, though he seemed happy otherwise, entrenched as he was in writing a script about the life of the activist John Brown. That one too, after twenty drafts, was laid to rest as Thomas kept trying to find that one project that would truly captivate him. His one real wish for the next decade was that there simply would be no *Their Billion Hands 6*. But sadly, it wasn't to be.

The next film in the now interminable series, released in 2018, wasn't even screened for critics, always the kiss of death. Two directors were fired, and the third, the helmer of two children's films and a made-for-cable police drama, removed his name from the finished product when the powers that were decided that they wanted things more funny and less grisly. The movie came out on Thomas Naroth's birthday, eleven years after his original classic. By now we didn't

even mention the corruption of his trilogy when we corresponded. I had been working steadily on movies that ranged from forgettable to quite good. Meanwhile, cinephiles were fascinated with Thomas's lack of output, grouping him in with Kubrick or Malick in terms of the care he exercised before proceeding forward creatively. Just when it seemed he was ready to shoot an adaptation of Stephen King's Dark Tower cycle, going so far as to prepare to meet with me to start shooting second-unit footage, he hit yet another creative snag and stalled, teaching piano to local kids three days a week out of boredom.

I still wasn't completely worried for him, though. After all, when a movie called *Their Billion Hands: Gene Pool* was released straight to streaming Internet video, he was still only forty-two years old, a young man. This latest mistake was nothing more than a jumble of hotties in their early twenties being trained to kill zombies in space. The dopey interactive element of the movie hilariously gave away the ending for those not bright enough to figure it out in the first fifteen minutes. *Gene Pool* was no more sophisticated than any undead opus you would have seen in the nineteen eighties. The good news was that the unprofitability point of this franchise, which was never meant to be one, had finally been reached, and it was never taken up again. Or who knows, maybe it would have become a TV series or something similarly inane had the world not suddenly changed so dramatically, so awfully, two years later, on January 9, 2021.

My friend Thomas Naroth and I finally came together to work on a project again in spring of the year 2023. We were both a little older, a little wiser, but there would be no joy in what we were doing—no inspiration, genre-bending, or creative discovery—just a dogged determination on Thomas's part that we act. Our project was a documentary entitled *The End of the Human Sun*. He had conceived the idea over the previous six months of surviving day to day in a catastrophically altered America that mirrored his darkest creative visions. It was the first major documentary about what first struck the world in 2021 like a terrible dream come to life, impossible but true, unthinkable but everywhere around us.

In our film, talking heads debated its cause, single mothers sheltered their children inside gymnasiums and abandoned nightclubs, the world's armies overstepped their bounds in ever-sophisticated and politically expedient ways, and America slowly became the hallucinatory prison we know today. Thomas, working under a sense of obligation, then dug deeper than all of that, and he took his time doing so. The two-part, five-hour program made for public television got closer to the undead than most people ever had. The scenes of Thomas and me trapped by zombies inside a moving van for six hours because of one miscalculation too many brought the terror of the situation too close to home for some—my wife in particular—and one outburst of violence against two sixth-graders at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin should simply never have been shown to anyone. We went back and forth over the necessity of that footage for weeks.

The madness of what we now faced every day was crystallized best in the documentary's most controversial scene, in which Thomas, one soundman, and myself, with the secret and completely unauthorized cooperation of a heartbroken soldier, filmed a day spent inside the killing rooms at Warrenton Proving Grounds in southern Virginia. Our footage finally confirmed the existence of sizeable zombie pens maintained to teach men how to kill the dead with their bare hands. Behind locked doors seventy feet underground, that rebellious (and now AWOL) soldier showed us the tricks he'd learned, and almost died in the process. For the first time Thomas Naroth was seen onscreen, gaunt and unable to smile, a very different man from the

gregarious chap who had made the definitive fictional version of the phenomenon that would later destroy us.

In the editing room, I was compelled to watch one particular moment dozens of times. We were in the rural house of a woman named Ellen Sheegan, interviewing her about the death of her husband. She was in the middle of responding to one of Thomas's questions when our sound man, Enzo Cardinale, could be heard in the background saying, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please listen for a moment.' The camera kept rolling as we all fell silent. At first there was nothing, but then we heard a soft thud from downstairs. Ellen Sheegan looked at the four of us in the room and asked if anyone had left a door open down there. Enzo started to leave the room, and the sound went dead. I lifted the camera and followed him to the top of the staircase. Enzo called out but got no response. It was at that point that I briefly swung the camera around to see if Thomas was behind me. The expression on his face was one of such sorrow, such exhaustion, that I found myself watching that moment more than any other in the film. He had reached his breaking point. Downstairs in Ellen Sheegan's house a deer had actually wandered in, not something terrifying at all. It didn't matter, though; the damage was done. None of us could focus for the rest of the night. We eventually got the full interview, for whatever it was worth.

With the country torn apart physically and psychologically and every fourth person unable to function normally due to undiagnosed shock, it was questionable what could be gained from watching *The End of the Human Sun*. More likely future generations will, if we ever emerge from our ongoing nightmare, clamor to it as a professional, thorough, and riveting document of madness. But today it feels to me, despite its technical excellence, nothing more than redundant, masochistic punishment. It took Thomas and me a year to shoot it. After it was done Thomas disappeared again, back to his farm in North Collins, New York, but this time almost without a word. He had become depressed, withdrawn, and frightened. He had realized that he might now not ever get the chance to direct a movie he truly wanted to, that he would forever be identified as a horror filmmaker and nothing more. More importantly, though, he feared for the safety of himself and his wife. Our brushes with danger during the shooting of *The End of the Human Sun* had damaged him more deeply than any of us realized. I would not see my friend and colleague again until November 9, 2024.

Last summer, a director named Erin Loomis, who had become entranced by Thomas Naroth's cinematic skill upon seeing *Their Billion Hands* as a college student with some of her friends, released a documentary about his life entitled *The Mirror in the Barn*. It began with his wife's recollection of how Thomas would, on most mornings during their later stays at the farm, walk down to the bank of the pretty little creek nearby to work on a song, but come back with sketches of zombies. Such was the curse, the documentary explained, of good-hearted Thomas, a poet and musician who long ago had an idea for a story about the living dead and a faithful connection at a small movie studio. His wildly successful zombie trilogy made him rich and famous, then doomed him to remorse as real-life events cut off all escape from his old identity.

Through archival interviews with the casts he worked with and colleagues who admired him, myself included, it was established that Thomas made zombie movies because he was attracted to the immense contrast between the absurdity of the subject and the seriousness of the themes he could attach to it. He wanted people to be dazed when they left the theater, 'psychologically molested,' as he put it once to me, by human violence and human tenderness fighting it out on the same screen. The accolades he won for his work made studios line up to offer him the

freedom to try something new, but he never did. For years after the apex of his career he lived contentedly with his wife on twelve acres of farmland, largely indifferent to the taint that other men's shoddy sequels cast upon his trilogy. Then came 2021, and he was forced like the rest of us to watch the cruelest fate imaginable descend upon the earth.

In *The Mirror in the Barn* his wife Donna described the onset of his depression in a voice that seemed cloaked with a permanent soul sickness of her own. In December of 2023 his niece was severely burned trying to evade an attack during her birthday party, and just a day later came the Golden Gate Bridge disaster. But the fact that reanimated corpses had come to actually threaten humanity was somehow no more disturbing to Thomas than the belief that his imagination had betrayed everyone who had watched his work and insulted the gravity of the new situation. At one time utterly convinced that his vision of a hypothetical apocalypse was the definitive one, the truth that real zombies were ten times more terrifying, the havoc set loose on his country twenty times more surreal, brought paralyzing guilt to his heart. There was no comic relief, no thematic subtlety, no art to the real carnage. He had been caught playing imagination games—good ones, everyone had always said—with something whose reality left no room for such hubris.

The actor who became a star because of the trilogy, Grant Estanovich, had a small but vital part in the documentary. A sadly suspenseful eight minutes of screen time were devoted to him tracking down an old videotape of him and Thomas drunkenly musing on the mind-bending cause of the real plague, at the end of which Thomas broke down in tears over the inadequacy of his trilogy to depict the simple nightmarish truth of a real zombie's face. As the plague raged on, he spent entire days not filling up notebooks with movie ideas, as he once did as a man in his twenties and thirties, but with tireless zombie-watching, a pair of binoculars and a sketchbook ever present. Even Erin Loomis couldn't decipher the meaning of his obsession, so she left it mostly to the audience to try, cleverly using pages from that sketchbook as intermittent title screens.

The movie taught people of the months of research Thomas did at twenty-two into death's effects on a hypothetical walking corpse, only to find that every one of the suppositions for which so many held him in admiration were proven to be grossly short-sighted. There was the description of a chance poignant meeting between Thomas and an extra in his second movie, a man who later, like his director, used the cinema to casually depict an awful tragedy that was to repeat itself off the screen: the destruction of a vast stretch of the Irish coast by a nuclear warhead. Most chillingly, Thomas's last possessions were found to include a letter from a woman in Arkansas who accused his very artistic presumption of bringing the dead down upon us.

It seemed no matter where he turned, he was reminded of the way his art had tried to imitate life but instead could only produce an embarrassing facsimile, once revered, later scorned. He was deeply ashamed of every frame of film whose supposed realism he had labored over for years. It wasn't surprising that his depression reached its nadir shortly after the completion of *The End of the Human Sun*. I still remember the writhing, headless surgeon shown in the opening shot of that film, and probably, so do you. It's understandable one might recall that and yearn to burn every frame of Thomas's three epics in pitiless frustration. Toward the last days of his life, Thomas disowned those works and found strange solace in repeated viewings of the last three sequels of the *Billion Hands* series, whose B-movie silliness offered an escapist release from the horrors going on outside his window. He told me over the phone that this was the way he should have made the stuff from the beginning: dumb and harmless, wanting to be nothing more than what it was.

Erin Loomis concluded her documentary by rolling an especially amateurish clip from *Their Billion Hands: Gene Pool*, removing all sound from it, and bringing in Thomas's *Winter Circus*, his very first musical composition, to score it. Instantly the mood and meaning of the scene transmogrified as if Thomas himself were playing with our expectations. The images of some lesser director's hackneyed vision of a zombie chase scene then merged into rarely seen images that Thomas had deleted from the first movie in his trilogy before its release: five violent shots that seemed to him at the time too explicitly bloody to include but which would soon seem officiously tame to a stunned populace, and five landscape shots I had spent hours composing whose beauty he'd deemed irrelevant. This intriguing montage served as more evidence that he could have broken his curse if he had only been able to summon one movie about something other than zombies, a single purifying motion picture to separate his fate from that of the hideous bodies that would soon grasp at his world every day. That movie never came, but with Erin Loomis's documentary, at least, his humanity was finally somewhat detached from the awful legacy of the time of the living dead.

There are some facts about Thomas's death that Ms. Loomis would certainly have wanted to include in her admirable work, and that only I was privy to. I'm speaking here of what happened on November 9, 2024. I will describe here the incident as best I can, for therapeutic reasons, mostly. I could, I suppose, make a movie myself someday, a short addendum to *The Mirror in the Barn*, something to close the story as it needs to be closed, but I can't see myself ever doing it. Let this be the only record of my experience.

Thomas went missing one day from the apartment he shared with his wife in Boston, having left a note saying simply that it was time to go. Donna felt immediately that it was a suicide note and called me because I was geographically closest to their North Collins farm during that time, taking care of my ailing mother just a hundred miles away. It was during this conversation with Donna that I finally became aware of how deep Thomas's depression had become. I immediately drove the two hours to the farm on Donna's suspicion that maybe he had gone there. On the way I had to negotiate my way past a roadblock; a containment squad had set up there briefly in order to quarantine a small church. There were three jeeps parked outside of it, and two servicemen from the D.A.S. were standing and smoking on the steps of an adjoining gift shop that sold homemade crafts and foods. They peered inside intently while one man spoke into a radio. In a sloping field behind the building, two more D.A.S. were walking toward someone who was strangely sitting in a wooden chair all alone and facing away from the squad, about a hundred yards away, right there on the grass. They had their guns ready. I looked away, anxious to not see.

The road ahead was marked with a yellow sign indicating that it was for the moment passable only in the case of an emergency. I explained bluntly to one of the D.A.S. what my emergency was, and he let me through. Between then and my arrival at the farm, I had one frightening moment. The sun was going down behind a vast expanse of woods that stretched ten miles on either side down the curvy country road I was traveling. I heard a ratcheting sound somewhere toward the front of my car, and it bucked a bit. I pulled over right away on the dirt shoulder and let the car idle on the shoulder for a moment, suddenly terrified. I was in the middle of nowhere. With the gearshift set in park I gunned the engine for a while, pleading with God to keep it running. It did. I pulled back onto the road, and there was no further incident. Looking to my left and right at the darkening woods as I drove, the thought of getting stuck there and not being

able to see what might be around me sunk into my brain and nested there for the rest of the journey.

Thomas's farm was on sixteen acres, reachable by navigating a twisting dirt lane leading back through parallel rows of trees. I got there at exactly six o'clock, and it was full dark. I parked in front of the ramshackle house he'd never improved. It was more than a hundred years old and falling apart in a hundred little ways. I didn't see any other cars around. I climbed the porch and knocked on the front door, but there was no answer. True to form, no one had locked the door, so I went in. The house was completely dark. I called out Thomas's name, but there was only silence, not even the ticking of the grandfather clock in the foyer. It must have stopped at some point and never been fixed. I made myself check the kitchen, turning some lights on. There was no sign that anyone had been here. With a real sense of dread I climbed the stairs leading to the bedrooms. I had my cellphone in my right hand as I went; I was supposed to call Donna as soon as I could establish that Thomas wasn't here. The door to the master bedroom was shut tight. I tapped on it twice and got no response. I turned the knob and pushed the door open. The bed inside appeared to have been slept in, though the covers hadn't been pulled back. They were rumpled though, uneven. I left the room.

Down the hall was a guest bedroom where I had stayed a couple of times over the years. It too was empty. Through its window I looked out on the rear of the property and the little barn out there sitting at the end of a path beaten through the grass. A light was on inside it, the faintest glow. I knew I would have to enter it. Back in the kitchen I noticed something on a little table in a breakfast nook. Beside a small vase of flowers there was a small clump of dirt and grass, sitting on the table's wooden surface. I touched it. The grass was the same temperature as the room; no way of telling where this fistful had come from, or when it had been pulled from the earth. I tried to ponder its meaning, but my mind was too much in chaos. I flipped a light switch above the sink to cast a sickly yellow glow on the yard, and I left the house through the back door and walked toward the barn. The doors leading inside were closed. I stopped in my tracks when I heard something off to my right. It was only the sound of twigs and leaves turning over all around me as the wind rose. But these days that is all it takes to raise the hackles on my neck, to stop and look around to make sure I am not alone. The psychologists call it pinprick awareness. Everyone's had it since the beginning of the nightmare. I had to really put my shoulder into pushing the barn doors inward.

The light was from a lamp set on a rickety wooden table, the one where Thomas sometimes set his laptop when he was composing some music out here. A car was parked inside the barn, a relatively new Volvo I hadn't seen before. Its driver's side door was open. I moved around the front of the car and looked inside. The keys were in the ignition. There was nothing and no one in the passenger's seat or the back seat. I slid behind the wheel. The keys were turned to the on position. I switched them back and tried to restart the car. Immediately I recognized the sound of an engine completely starved for gas. I got out of the car, shaking. I went around to the back of it and saw what I had been dreading. There were swatches of cloth, torn-up bath towels it turned out, jammed into the exhaust pipe. I wondered how long it would have taken Thomas to die if he had remained in the car, if the asphyxiation would even have worked given the size of the barn. I just didn't know. Maybe he had given up; maybe it had come to nothing and he had left the barn. I turned off the lamp and plunged the barn into darkness, and then I left it.

I staggered back to the house, crying, the tears freezing on my cheeks, and I entered the kitchen again. I crossed through into the dark dining room and slumped in one of the stiff-backed wooden chairs around the table, hanging my head, squeezing my eyes shut. After five minutes like that I looked through a wide picture window at the little barn in the distance, at the leaves

rolling across the grass, at the tiny stripe of purple over the horizon. I had left the floodlight on, showing me dead grass and skeletal leaves. I called Donna and told her that Thomas was not here at the farm. I told her I would drive to her tonight and we would figure out what to do next. Then I actually put my head down on the table, enclosing it in my arms like a child at school disciplined for being bad, and I sat like that until I was overcome by fatigue, and it was right there that I fell asleep—or rather my brain knocked me out to protect me for just a little while from stress and fear.

I was out for a little more than an hour. When my eyes opened I at first didn't even know where I was, but then it all came rushing back to me, how I was the only human being for a mile in any direction, searching for my friend. I raised my head and looked at the pictures on the wall beside the dining room table, trying to focus. Donna had painted these in happier days, images of the countryside in summertime. My arms tingled uncomfortably, and I looked down to see the short hairs on them were standing on end. I felt a presence nearby. Nervously I called out Thomas's name. There was no answer. I turned then and looked straight ahead through the picture window out onto the land behind the house.

Thomas Naroth stood on the cold back lawn of his old farmhouse, perfectly still in the floodlight's pool of weak yellow and orange, looking back at me through the window. He wore a red flannel shirt, tattered slacks, black tennis shoes. I cannot say how long he had been dead, but it had been more than a day, certainly. Even from a distance I could see that his head had become grossly enlarged and misshapen, as had his hands, which were now twice the size of a normal man's, the fingers almost like tentacles. His feet, too, were undoubtedly severely bloated to the point where he would have had trouble balancing on them. One of his arms, his left, was raised high above his head, but utterly without intent. His muscles had spasmed and completely locked that way so that the arm was nothing more than a useless branch protruding from him, rigid, immobile. His hair, instead of falling out, had already sprouted and grown much longer than he had ever worn it in life. It was completely gray and hung down in front of his blackened face, which was now unrecognizable, his features mutated and pushed outwards as if a tiny explosion had occurred inside his skull.

The face had, predictably, begun to split raggedly down the middle, the flesh hanging loosely and messily as if pasted on. In another two or three days the thing that was once Thomas would begin to claw at that flesh, and it would slide off the skull bit by bit. By then his entire body would have bloated to the point of bursting his clothes, and on day six or seven it would start to collapse back in on itself. First his ankles would shrink and become too spindly to support his weight, and he would fall to the ground, never to rise again. His entire lower body would shrivel day by day until his waist was half the circumference it used to be, and his vital organs would detach and settle into his stomach, puffing him out there. At that point all that would move would be his head and his arms, reaching out to sink long, curling fingernails into anything that passed. Those fingernails, now an inch long, would grow to a length of five or six inches if nothing stopped them. His eyes would be sunken so deep into their sockets that it would seem as if he had none. His head, becoming something more like a rotting pumpkin, would weigh so much compared to the rest of him that his neck wouldn't be able to lift it anymore. Finally his movements would simply cease and he would be no more.

For now, though, he stood, eighty percent blind, eighty percent deaf. He seemed to see me, but this wasn't possible. If he had seen me, he would have walked forward, sensing that a living thing was nearby. He would try to kill me by strangling me with his one working hand, and because he was unable to control the intensity of his grip, he would keep tightening it until my throat was completely crushed and the remnants of his own brain began to burst. He would

keep strangling me long after I was dead. The sheer effort of it would cause his body to rupture in a dozen places, and his blood would pour out of them as if through a paper bag, and he would cease to be just as I had—until I myself began to rise. With his last bit of strength he may or may not crawl on top of me, open his mouth, and use it to search out my tongue, biting it off and then attempting, probably unsuccessfully, to swallow it. These were the details Thomas Naroth had never imagined fifteen years before, but which were real to us now.

I got up out of my chair, and I looked at him through the window, placing one hand on the cold pane. He did not move. The wind rocked his body gently. His head, so bulbous and top-heavy with the sickness of the undead that it tilted grotesquely to one side, shook ever so slightly. He could not be identified had his own wife stood before him. I only knew it was him because of that red flannel shirt. He had a dozen of them. Seconds passed, and then Thomas's right foot lifted ever so slightly and he placed it a few inches forward. When it connected with the ground, he almost fell over, then righted himself. His brain recalculated, recalculated, planning the next step. Eventually it would work well enough to keep him moving. But I would be gone by then.

I waited no longer to move. I went through the house, and I drove away from the farm, but not before I turned off the lawn floodlight, leaving Thomas Naroth in the darkness he craved. My last image of him was of a silhouette in the moonlight, standing there, one arm above his head, motionless, rooted in place until his brain sent him some sort of signal to move, a signal that might never have come. But it did. They still haven't found Thomas, who could have done himself in by shotgun or leaping from a high ledge or even drowning, giving him a chance to remain still wherever he died. Instead he chose, out of crushing guilt perhaps, a method of suicide that would certainly leave him undead. Everyone knows of the suicide attempt; I couldn't lie and say there hadn't been one. I saw Thomas nine days ago, and by now peace has come for my friend, surely. Donna obviously suspects I hold a secret I'll never reveal, not to her, and certainly not to anyone else, least of all a once-ravenous movie-viewing public to whom the word zombie, at one time a source of entertainment and intrigue, has instead become the blackest profanity the universe has ever borne.

visitation

My name is James Twain. At a little past two a.m. on the night of January 3, 2007, I was awakened by a knock at the front door of my recently purchased house in Littlejohn, Illinois. When the knocking didn't stop, I got up, went down the stairs, and opened the door. A man was standing outside in the cold, a man of about forty-five, short, bald, wearing a white t-shirt and sweatpants. He said he had flipped his car at the end of the road and wanted to know if he could use my phone. He didn't seem injured at all, and he confirmed this to me. He'd swerved to avoid a man on a bicycle coming around the corner and hit a freak bump and overcompensated by jerking the wheel to avoid a stump, and the next thing he knew the entire car was upside down.

No one had been hurt. The man didn't seem too terribly disturbed by this, just inconvenienced. I let him come in and pointed him to the phone in the kitchen, and when he went that way I stepped out onto the front stoop. Green Temple Road was a very long one, so I couldn't see to the end of it. No other cars went in either direction. It was bitterly cold, so I went back inside quickly.

The man was already coming back out of the kitchen; his call had been very quick. I asked him if he wanted some water, but he politely declined. I had to ask him the question of why he had walked all the way to my house instead of something closer, and he shook his head and looked away, saying that he felt like he might be in shock, and he looked up and down himself to make sure he really was not injured. He didn't remember hitting his head, but he couldn't be sure. I told him to sit down, that we really should call for an ambulance, but he absolutely didn't want that. He apologized for troubling me and headed out the door without another word. I wondered who exactly he had called when he was in the kitchen. I watched him head to the west, walking more or less normally, until he disappeared into the dark beyond a streetlight. Then I closed the door and went back up to bed. Sleep was a long time in coming as I imagined the stark terror my visitor must have felt when his car began to tumble. I wondered if I should have trusted him that the man on the bicycle wasn't hurt. But by the time I got to the end of the road surely the police would be there. So selfishly I let it go.

I checked the local newspaper the next day for any mention of a single car crash near me, but I struck out. That afternoon when I was walking my dog I went a little out of my way to roughly the spot where I figured the accident had occurred. From the way the man had described it, I figured I isolated the spot pretty well, but I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Out of nagging curiosity I knocked on the door of the house across the street. A woman answered, herding two young children away from the door. I said hello and asked her if she had been awakened by an accident the night before. She said no, and coincidentally she had been awake right around 2 a.m. She'd been watching a movie on TV but hadn't heard a thing. I decided to let the mystery lay there.

It was almost three weeks later that I came awake in the middle of the night again. It was 2:57, to be exact. I wasn't sure why I'd awoken; there hadn't been any sound to make it happen. My dog, Lexa, was sleeping in a cushioned chair in the corner of the darkened bedroom, but when I came awake she immediately did too. Right away she began to whimper and whine, which was unusual. She got up and came to me, doing more of the same. I thought I'd use the bathroom and then go down to the kitchen to get her a dog treat. I started down the stairs to the bottom floor when I got a strange feeling that I wasn't alone. I looked into the darkness of the living room and saw a shape, someone sitting on my sofa. Quickly I reached behind me to turn on the light above the staircase. It cast enough light that I could see that my visitor from the other night was in my home again, sitting on the sofa, staring into space.

He was dressed exactly the same as he had been the night of the accident. His stare was vacant and strange. It was a full two seconds after I turned on the light that he turned his face to me. I muttered a very nervous, very unnerved hello, making my disquiet very obvious I hoped. The man looked up at me, and without changing his expression he said hello in a friendly manner. I came to the bottom of the steps but moved no closer. I asked him if he needed help. He turned away from me, looking out the front window of the house again. He shook his head without a word. I asked him what he was doing here. I had to ask a second time, because he didn't seem to hear me in whatever daze he was stuck in. The next time he spoke his voice was somewhat softer. I had to lean forward to hear him. He said, "They were just dolls to me," or something like it. I couldn't be sure if that was exactly right.

I took a couple of steps toward him but stopped short of actually entering the living room. I told him he had to go, but he only kept staring through the window. Without hesitating, I walked quickly into the kitchen, letting him out of my sight, and I took my cellphone out of its charger and dialed the police. I didn't want the man arrested, just taken to wherever he needed to go. Something was very wrong with him. As I dialed, I walked back to the living room to tell the man that I was calling someone to take him out of there unless he wanted to leave himself. But he was gone. The space on the sofa where he'd been was empty. I turned to the front door, but it obviously hadn't been opened. There hadn't even been time, and I would have heard it. I looked up the staircase. Lexa was there, whimpering. I would have heard creaking footsteps on the bare wood if he had gone up there, but again, it had been maybe ten seconds from the time I'd left him to the time I'd returned. He couldn't even be gone. It didn't make sense.

I stood in the living room for several minutes after that, looking out the window at the road outside. Lexa never left me. I went to the front door, and I opened it. I decided for my peace of mind that I wanted to make absolutely certain the man wasn't around anymore, so I went to the edge of my driveway and looked in both directions. The street was empty of course, or so I thought at first. But then I did see something.

All the way down Green Temple Road, just before the point where it curved out of sight, there was a streetlight. And sitting beneath that streetlight, with his back against the pole, was a man. He was so far away that at first I couldn't even be sure it was my visitor. But then that faraway stranger raised a hand, and gently waved at me. I did not wave back. I could see no details of his face, but it was obvious that he was wearing a white shirt, just sitting there in the cold beneath the streetlight. I turned and went back into the house. I went up the stairs, Lexa following me, and I went into my bedroom, crossing it to the window that looked out on the spot where I'd just seen the man. But I wasn't able to see him after all. There were trees blocking the view, and even in winter I couldn't see through the leafless branches. At some point I felt comfortable enough that I could lay down and close my eyes. But sleep wouldn't come, and didn't come for the rest of the night. I just couldn't be sure he wasn't coming back.

The next day I was tutoring players at the golf club I manage when I got a call from my ex-wife about the house we'd sold a year before. It reminded me to check something on my cellphone. I looked at all my outgoing calls for the past month; the information for each was stored. Looking at the night of the stranger's accident, I didn't see any outgoing call at all. He had gone into the kitchen to use my phone, but no call had been placed.

That night back at home, Lexa's whimpering actually woke me up. It was only a little past midnight, and I'd been asleep for maybe an hour. She stood at the side of my bed. There was nothing really urgent about her sounds; she just seemed unhappy about something. I got up and felt immediately afraid. I stood in one spot, shushing the dog so I could hear anything that might be going on in the house. But there was nothing, no sound. Before I went downstairs, I looked around for some sort of object I could hold, something heavy, just to make myself feel more secure in case the stranger had gotten inside my house again and become more unpredictable. It was going to have to be a golf club. I picked it up and took my cellphone with me as I went to the staircase. I turned the light on before I headed down and waited for any sound, any sign that someone might be down there. Again, it was just impossible to tell.

The living room, at least, was empty. From there I went into the kitchen, and went to the cupboard to get a glass. That was when I stepped on something in the dark. I looked down and saw three small objects on the kitchen floor, spread out. They were dolls, children's dolls. The one I had stepped on was a standard Barbie-type of doll, and the others were similar but formed to be children. The adult doll was beside the counter where the sink was, and the other two were a few feet away, at the base of the refrigerator. They were all face down. I didn't get too close a look at them at first. I left them where they were and continued through the house, turning on all the lights and checking all the doors. Before I opened the basement door I replaced the golf club I was holding with a baseball bat from my tote bag. I hadn't changed the light bulb in the basement since it had blown out a week before, too distracted to pick one up at the grocery store. I rarely went down there. I took the flashlight from one of the kitchen drawers and opened the door, shining it down the stairs. I called out, asking if anyone was there. No response. I descended three of the steps, their loud creaking making me wince inwardly; I didn't want to make any sound. I moved the beam of the flashlight across the basement and didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

The only place left to check was back upstairs. I went from room to room, ready to swing the bat. But I was alone. When that was done, I came back down and picked up the dolls, setting them on the counter. There was nothing unusual about them except their presence in my house. I had eaten dinner in the kitchen and then more or less gone right to bed. Sometime in the past two hours they'd appeared. All the doors in the house were locked. I put on some clothes, and I took Lexa and I left. I didn't want to be in the house at all; I wouldn't be able to sleep there, not tonight and not for a while. There was a dumpy motel about five miles away on I-30, and I checked in there. I didn't know what else to do. When morning came I went back to the house and found that nothing else had happened. Before night came, though, I went back to the motel and checked right back in. Over a solitary dinner in some chain restaurant I sat and thought about what came next.

I am a pragmatic and rational man, but I had an experience as a teenager that changed my beliefs in a powerful way. I was thirteen years old at the time and miserable because of my mother's remarriage to a man I hated, the perfect example of the bad stepfather, a tough disciplinarian who I feared. One night I was in bed alone in my room very late when I felt a light brushing on my ankle. I kicked what I thought was a bug or something away from me, but it returned a minute later. It felt like a finger, trying to trace something on my ankle. Again and again I shifted, and at one point got out of bed and stood up, but when I returned to a prone position it came back. There in the dark I began to become very afraid. I didn't want to turn the lights on for fear my stepfather would see them and become angry that I was awake. So I lay there in my bed, shutting my eyes tight. This time I let the finger trace a broken path on my ankle until it stopped thirty seconds later.

It didn't return that night, during which I stayed awake till dawn, but it did a week later. The sensation could only be described as a light finger writing on my ankle, making me come awake from a deep sleep. Utterly terrified, I nevertheless suffered in silence. I couldn't cry out; my stepfather would come running, and he would be furious. The finger repeated its motions three times before I wrenched my ankle away. When it returned once more, about three weeks later, I tried to sense what it was that it was writing on my ankle. It was a single word, and that word, I deduced, was *toys*. I know I wasn't mistaken. I knew this was what it was. Three times and then it stopped. I didn't have to jerk my leg away. It happened once more at the end of the

month, a day after my birthday. I never told anyone. I thought it was a phenomenon that would never happen again, and I was so intimidated by my own weakness that I thought something was wrong with me.

But then one night several weeks later I came awake in the dark, and I began to feel a little sick to my stomach. I remember I was lying on my side, facing the wall. My clock radio said 3:10. I had left the local rock station on very low when I'd fallen asleep, but now it was silent, off the air. There was the tiny sound of low static in its place. It was at that exact moment that all at once, out of nowhere, I felt a cold human hand seize my right ankle, gripping it tightly. My will broke at once, and I screamed and thrashed in terror. The invisible hand let go and vanished. My mother and my stepfather came into my room as I cried, and I simply broke down before them, all the terror I had somehow bottled up coming out in tears and whimpers. I was practically doubled over with the force of it all. It frightened my parents to the point where they obviously didn't believe me when I told them that I kept having terrible dreams of dying. But they didn't push the issue. After that, I was never again awakened in the middle of the night by the feeling of something touching me. But I knew my occasional awakenings at three or four in the morning as a college student and then as an adult were a remnant of the fear of feeling that hand return. Because of this episode, I was more than ready to believe that the man who had entered my home was not truly alive.

There were a couple of things I needed from the house, so I did swing back over there at about eight-thirty two nights after I'd left upon finding those dolls. As I pulled up, my headlights picked out a man standing on my doorstep. He looked like he was affixing something to my door. I didn't recognize him when he turned around. I got out of my car very cautiously as he approached, but his demeanor set me at ease. He introduced himself as John, and said he used to own my house before me. We had never met; I'd never had any dealings with anyone besides the realtor, since the house had been vacant for a year and a half before it was sold. I shook his hand and he was apologetic. He said he had explained things in the letter he was about to leave for me, and it was awkward to be here now, having to explain in person. He asked if we could talk for a bit inside. I said okay. I turned on all the lights inside. John and I sat in the living room, he sitting in the exact spot where the stranger had. John explained that after the house was built he'd lived in it with his wife for only six weeks before moving out. The realtor had told me it was because of a sudden military deployment, but John said this wasn't true. He wanted to know if I'd encountered anything unusual since moving in.

I found myself telling him almost the whole story of the night visitor, and he seemed to understand perfectly. The same man had come to him in the night as well the year before. There had been three such visits, he told me. His story and mine were almost identical. At first I couldn't believe it, but I made sure to parcel out my information carefully so he couldn't simply follow my tale. He mentioned the dolls in the kitchen before I even could. We rose and he pointed out the spots on the floor where he had seen them, and the experience mirrored mine precisely. The events were repeating themselves. When I asked him what the third visit from the stranger was like, he fell quiet for a moment, disturbed by the memory. He had awoken one night to see a shape at the foot of his bed. It was the stranger. John's wife had screamed and screamed beside him as the stranger merely turned away with perfect calm and walked out slowly through the bedroom door. John, who had begun already to believe they were dealing with a ghost, had calmed her and held her down instead of attacking the stranger. And then, two nights later, the cycle had begun again, with the stranger knocking at the door and asking

if he could come inside to use the phone after a car accident. His manner, his speech, his movements had been identical to the first encounter. John had slammed the door on him, and he and his wife had left the house that very night, never to return.

The stranger's name, John told me, was Mason Berkman. He was a postal carrier who had lived in this house from 1992 to 1997, when he'd killed his wife and two daughters with a hatchet one night. He'd tricked them into going into the basement, then waited for them in the kitchen to return, attacking them right there. He had done this for no other reason, it was believed, than that he was having an affair with a woman across town and he was afraid of being discovered. After the killings he had gotten in his car and driven at great speed toward the end of Green Temple Road, losing control and flipping when he had ironically swerved to avoid a complete stranger while his family, his children, lay butchered behind him. It must have been an instinctual reaction. He hadn't been killed immediately. Berkman had climbed out of his car, and bleeding internally, most likely in deep shock, had stumbled down the road. He'd made it all the way back to his own home, collapsing in the foyer, dead just around the corner from the kitchen. This had all been in the newspapers at the time. I'd never known about it, coming here from out of state.

John had returned to the house when he'd heard from the realtor that I'd been here for a month. He had to know if the haunting was still going on. He apologized for what I had endured and offered to buy the house back from me. I asked him what he thought would happen if I stayed. He wasn't sure. Maybe there would never be any real danger. Or maybe Mason Berkman's appearances would metamorphose into something else. John and I talked for a total of two hours, and then he suggested something a little strange, which was that he wait up in the house for Berkman to return. Like me, he was both horrified by the goings-on yet also compelled to find out more. But I thought it best that neither one of us ever come back here. We both left the house after shaking hands. He drove his way, back to a different county, and I drove to my shoddy motel.

I was unwilling to sell the house to anyone else but financially unable to keep it. By the end of April I was in desperate straits. It was then that I began to research and write to organizations that might be interested in the house as a site of paranormal investigation. Reputable organizations were extremely difficult to find. I did receive a call back from one in particular, the Fernmoor Fund for Psychic Research. The woman on the phone asked me to write my story down in as much detail as I possibly could, starting several weeks before the visit from Mason Berkman and ending not with his second appearance and the discovery of the dolls, but everything that came afterward, everything. This she stressed especially. So I did so, and sent her a twenty-page letter this time instead of two. A week after that she came to see me personally. We met in an Irish bar on the side of Route 22.

I end this story by saying that a family of six lives in my house now. They're in no danger of any supernatural visitation. The woman from the Fernmoor Fund explained it all to me. It's been four years since I met Mason Berkman. A few days before movers came to remove all my things from the house permanently, I returned one more time. I went at night. I almost never made it out of the car, I was shaking so badly. I spent some minutes calming myself, disappointed that if I was able to remain silent for so long with a ghost touching me at age thirteen, I couldn't bring myself to confront one more, one who could not possibly harm me. Eventually I was able to stand on my front step, put the key in the lock, and push open the door. Even before I went

inside I could sense a presence in there. He would be in the living room, of course. Waiting, waiting there every night, at the exact same time. I moved forward and looked to my left, into the living room.

John, the man who had pretended to be a concerned homeowner from up north and my ally, sat on my sofa in a pool of moonlight. On his lap he held a shotgun. John Horace, brother of Livie Berkman, and uncle of Beverly and Samantha Berkman, stared into space, waiting for the cruel monster who had slaughtered his loved ones to return so he could exact revenge. His ghost had tricked me into allowing him into my home four years before, and now that he was here, he would never truly leave. There may even come a night, the psychic researcher had told me, when the two men would meet, and there would be great violence. Or perhaps I would witness John Horace's suicide by hanging, which had occurred a year after his sister's burial. There in my home, John Horace slowly turned his head to look at me. He asked me if I had seen a man outside drive off in a Ford Escort. I said no. He asked me if I had heard a crash. I said no. He then told me I shouldn't go into the kitchen. I left him then and exited the house. To this day I think but am not certain that I saw rope burns on the man's neck.

No one but me would ever be able to see either John Horace or Mason Berkman or the dolls on the kitchen floor. It was my innate nature that allowed me, or forced me, to see them and become part of their demented drama, and to feel that icy hand on my ankle three decades ago. What it also means, I've been told, is that I may not be done with encountering the supernatural world. Another ghost could appear to me at any time. In fact, if I were to return to my childhood home even now and fall asleep in the room I grew up in, I might feel the hand again writing the word *toys* on my ankle. The only real escape for someone like me is to keep moving and keep forgetting what I've seen and felt.

Just last Friday night I was at a party for a technology executive at a nice house in the country; there were at least a hundred people there, and I was having a good time meeting people when I noticed someone who didn't seem to be moving in a chair in the corner. Looking more closely, I saw it was a young woman, sitting straight upright, whose flesh had gone an ashen gray all over, her face drawn and blank. Both her corneas were utterly bloodshot to the point where they were almost black. She was motionless, dead, dead for a long time. People moved all around her, not seeing her. I walked closer and took in every detail, standing there with a scotch in my hand. She wore a necklace with a blue stone. Her ankles had been tied together with wire. Her feet were gone, severed. Blood was dripping on the floor. I left the party and drove home through the dark countryside, and instead of wondering who I had seen and why it was there I had seen her, I simply began to hope that my life would not be such a long one, that my affliction would end before it drove me mad.

lake

My name is Major Kensing Colby. On December 2, 2056, I set out alone from the German space station Ehrgeiz in a gray-class single-seat locator, headed toward the Bessarabia Sector to complete a brief recovery mission on Teltrin. Two weeks earlier, Ellen Hernandez had died there when her spacesuit was torn by a flying shard of irradiated coolant released by an explosion on one of Russia's nuclear-powered satellites. The other members of her crew had had to take off for their own safety from the freak storm, and her body hadn't been recovered yet. That was to be my job. Teltrin was a desert void that had aggravated both DLR and NASA for years now with its maddening and conflicting soil evidence of a substantial water source that was probably never going to be found. Ellen Hernandez had been collecting ever more samples when the coolant storm killed her. All that was left now was the slow pulse of the positioning chip embedded in her left boot heel. It was this that I followed all the way down to the vast, arid surface.

It was almost entirely an instrument landing. I kicked up so much toxic soil as I descended that too much got sucked into both main engines and played hell with the craft's heating core, but this was only a minor annoyance. It was a relatively smooth operation. When I was firmly down I revved up the beacon lights and napped for the ten minutes they took to gain full power. Turning each one on to flood the surrounding square mile with pale, sickly illumination produced an impressively loud series of metallic clanking sounds inside the craft, twelve in all. Then there was just the depressing silence that cloaked Teltrin and everything else out in the deep reaches of space. Teltrin's atmosphere of nitrogen, argon, and belclarium discolored the white light of the beacons into a muddy, rusty red. I saw a flat, empty plain through the forward window. Same through the rear. But I had calculated my position quite well, and on monitor eight I could see a good clean image of the area around the craft. Ellen Hernandez's body was there, face up on the plain. The image was so clear I could see where her suit and her body had been torn, right at her waist on the left side. A big tear too, bloody. The shard of coolant that had done it might have been traveling at two hundred miles per hour or more. I saw no actual coolant debris anywhere. It was long gone by now, well past Eldrinda probably.

I had a full twenty hours or so before the atmosphere began to freeze the ignition seams inside the engines, so I took the time to eat something before I headed out. After that I began the process of donning and securing my suit and prepping the cart that would carry Hernandez back to the craft. It was not quite noon Ehrgeiz time when I checked in with the station and then went through the unlock sequence and opened the hatch to allow me onto the surface of Teltrin. Never before had I been completely alone on a mass such as this, though I had been trained for it. The silence and the darkness could be psychologically damaging if you weren't prepared for it. Human beings are not wired to be plunged into such isolation. At any time I could open communications with the Ehrgeiz by merely speaking aloud inside my helmet, but since they had me hitched to a bio-track I felt no need.

The cart followed me as I stepped onto the planet's thin soil and into that bath of red light. It was only a five-minute walk to the body. The fact that I had not known Ellen Hernandez saved me from the furor of emotion that had stricken a few of my colleagues up on the Ehrgeiz. To me she was just an errand. When I reached her I crouched down and removed the tracker from her boot so Ron Railsberg could look at the data and maybe learn a tiny bit more about how quickly she'd died. I could see one side of her face through her faceplate. Her left eye was open. I looked

away, off at the incredibly tiny pinpricks of stars. I had never actually touched a corpse before. I was about to start adjusting the cart to automatically scoop her up when one of the beacon lights died, not unexpectedly, changing the nature of the glow around me ever so subtly. But that was enough to plunge that feeling into me like an ice pick, that feeling of being impossibly far from any living presence and less than a speck of helpless breath and being. It was like waking up in a coffin, and it only lasted an instant before up went the mental wall that blocked out the scary reality of the moment. I wasn't about to freeze up or panic like some did during the sensory deprivation tests back at Langley.

I noticed something in the distance, at the very, very edge of the beacon lights' reach, the point where that red glow dissolved into nothingness. At first it looked to me like the edge of a rock formation, an anomaly on the otherwise blank landscape. We knew that such formations were fairly common; the unusual shape of some of them was what gave some of us hope of a water source. But as my vision adjusted I realized it was not a rock formation. Not at all. I walked past the corpse toward that place where the light faded to black. I stopped twenty yards later and just stood and stared. What I was looking at was the back of a school bus. Yes. A traditional school bus, facing away from me. Each step brought me more detail. Soon enough I could read the Colorado license plate. A number on the rear emergency door marked the bus. Bus number 68. The front half was totally in the dark.

I don't remember how long I stood there before I went forward into that patch of black emptiness. I did not question the reality of what I was seeing, not for a moment. Whether it was real or illusion or imagined didn't enter into my course of action. I reached my left hand out and felt for the side of the bus with my glove. With my right, I reached up to the trip that would disconnect any incoming transmissions from the Ehrgeiz. I wanted the silence now, and this cut off even the tiny static hum of the open channel. I soon came to an obstruction; the bus's accordion door was open. I ran my glove over the glass and positioned myself where the steps would lead me up and in. But it was a long time before I climbed them. You see, never before had the door been open. Not twelve years ago, when the bus had first appeared to me in my hometown of Saint Augustine, and not four when I'd followed it at two in the morning to an open field after it had actually passed me on Baley Ridge Road seventy miles outside Denver. My will to approach it as it sat in that field had failed me badly that night, bad enough to send me to the closest bar I could find, where I drank myself into oblivion.

The open door told me this would be the end of it. They finally wanted me aboard. And I was obliged to obey. I had just enough willpower to look back toward my craft once more, and even if I'd had the strength to go towards it, I couldn't anyway. Because Ellen Hernandez was now standing on the spot where she'd lain, standing there as if to keep me from going back. She had removed her helmet. The belclarium had sucked all the moisture from her flesh, so her face, what I could see of it at that distance, looked cracked all over, and her eyes had vanished into their sockets. Most of her hair had fallen out. Her legs were covered in blood.

It was an effort in that atmosphere just to lift each leg high enough to maneuver into the tight space at the bus's entry point. The bulk of my suit brushed on what felt like handrails on either side of me. So dark was it that I would not have been able to see them had I pressed my face to them. I was utterly blind and deaf. But then when I turned my body to the left upon ascending two steps, the red glow of the distant beacon lights showed me the silhouettes of several heads of human beings sitting on the bus's seats. Fourteen of them, there were. They did not move. Many of the seats were empty. They wanted me to be among them. It was time. I took a few steps forward. The two silhouettes at the back of the bus were clearest. The light brushed the sides of their faces. I sensed rather than saw a head turn slightly to watch me pass. I steadied

myself by touching the backs of the seats. A few feet from the end of the aisle I maneuvered clumsily onto one of them. I sat toward the edge, facing the front. Across the aisle were the obsidian outlines of two people who I felt were staring at me, eyes invisible. Had they reached out to touch me, I would of course have gone mad.

I was twenty years old when I caused the accident that took all their lives, and the driver's, who hadn't been much older than I was. A quarter of a century ago now. It had been a day trip for them, an outing from the senior center on Ronstick Road where they passed their quiet days. None was under seventy years old. I'd cut the bus off in my Honda as I was trying to pass a slow-moving sedan in the rain. It had all happened in an instant. I never saw the bus swerve and then overcompensate, sending it onto the shoulder and then across the opposing lane toward a drop of forty feet beyond a rusty guardrail. I had driven on, assuming I had merely caused a bit of a jolt. It was only later that I learned what had become of them. Their day trip to Lake Edmund had been the last of their lives. I'd never told anyone, anyone what had happened. I'd even managed to pass NASA's psych evals, maybe because it took years for the guilt to sink in so deeply that it never left. The Kensing Colby before that day and the one after were two very different human beings. But this wasn't enough for the people on the school bus. They wanted to stretch my suffering out across the decades.

After five minutes, maybe ten of sitting there, insensate and numb, I felt we were moving. The bus had begun to roll forward. We were going somewhere. I closed my eyes and leaned back against my seat. It couldn't properly be called terror, what I was feeling. Instead my conscious mind had finally detached from the desire for self-preservation entirely. I lost all awareness at one point and fell into a dreamless abyss, much like they told me hypersleep would be like. When I awoke, nothing had changed except that through the front window of the bus I could see a deep band of blue in the sky, telling me the impossible, that we had traversed thousands of miles of dead terrain and were on the other side of Teltrin now. That vast blue band brought out the silhouettes of those sitting in front of me as well as the driver, who kept both hands assuredly on the wheel as we rolled forward at fifteen or twenty miles per hour. Time spun out. Once every few hours we went past a rock formation or strange slope that broke up the void. At its brightest, the blue band brought enough light into the bus that I could see my gloves, and finally, some small details of the faces of the old couple sitting across the aisle from me. Their eyes were riveted directly forward, their haggard faces without expression or expectation.

And so we drove, and drive even now, ceaselessly across Teltrin. I suppose time has never actually moved and no one will be coming down from the Ehrgeiz to rescue me, ever. Sometimes the total darkness returns completely for what feels like days at a time; sometimes the light is there. I see new features on the landscape through the windows, but while the scientists of the Ehrgeiz still have a dim hope of finding a water source here, those on the bus will never find the one they sought twenty-six years ago. Twice the bus has stopped entirely, and I could just make out the driver pouring over a roadmap as if he had lost his way, perhaps growing more and more frustrated about Lake Edmund's whereabouts, not understanding why reaching it is impossible. I intend to meet my fate honorably and have no intention of ever rising from my seat. I'll wait for as long as it takes for some final act to kill me mercifully, or at least give me a glimpse of a future beyond space, time, and torment.

solitude

My name is Les Cleverly. It was on a cold winter Monday that I sent letters to all my friends telling them about my plan. I'd set myself up for a full year of unemployment so I could finally give the Luddite life a try, in order to clear my mind of the internet, and usernames, and passwords, and cable TV, and the 24/7 media cycle, even the car and the traffic that came with it. I found it all too exhausting, so I was going old school. I didn't even have a phone, effective immediately. I knew I'd probably cave as soon as I realized I wasn't getting any new followers on Twitter, but in the letter I wrote to my friends, I told everyone that for a while I'd love to just get real letters back from them. They could feel free to come to my little house in the middle of nowhere anytime at all, because my door was always going to be open, figuratively speaking. It felt so good to put those letters in the mailbox and go back into the house and sit, and look at all the books I wanted to read, and all the empty ones I wanted to fill with my thoughts and my bad poems and my ignorant philosophies. I was happy. It had actually already been almost two weeks since I'd even ventured outside the house or turned on the TV. I felt ensconced. I felt safe.

The very next night, something strange happened. I'd come awake in my bedroom. I wasn't even sure what time it was, because I had gotten rid of my digital clock, along with almost everything else electronic. I only knew that it was really late. I was lying there listening to the drizzle outside, and there was a knock at my front door, which is always an unsettling sound so late when you're alone. I waited, and I hoped it wouldn't repeat itself, but it did, so I got up and went to the door.

While I stood there in front of it, I waited for the knock to come a third time, and through the door I asked who was there. I recognized the voice that responded, a slurred, and maybe drunken one. It was an ex-girlfriend of mine out there, Sarah. It was a relief and also a profound irritation to hear her speak. She'd sort of disappeared off the face of the earth a few weeks before, and I'd had to fend off calls from her mother who worried about her all the time, even though Sarah had done this before. She was an alcoholic and a maker of terrible choices. Now she was at my door like in the old days, wanting to come in, in the middle of the night, some crisis having happened or something like that. I told her through the door that no, we were not going to go through all this again, that I wasn't going to open the door. She pleaded her case. I forget what she said exactly, but I held my ground. I wasn't going to get involved in this anymore. Then at one point there was a strange little pause, and I thought she was done speaking. I could hear her say this through the door: 'It would be better if you were like us, Les.' I asked her to repeat that, but she didn't. There was prolonged silence outside, and I heard her footsteps leaving. I figured that was the end of it, and I went back to bed.

A couple of days later I went outside for the first time in a while, and I went down the driveway to get my mail. When I opened the box I was confused, because some letters that I had put in there to be delivered were still in there. I had made sure the flag was up, so it didn't make any sense. On my way back to the front door I happened to look down, and I saw four or five dime-sized drops of blood there on the sidewalk. It was dried and darkened; no telling quite where they had come from. I didn't remember ever seeing them there, four of five in a line. I bent down to examine them, thinking of Sarah.

I spent that afternoon writing and drinking a pot of coffee at my desk in the living room, and at one point I got up to stretch my legs a little and look out the window. I live on a very remote

country road, about 18 miles off Interstate 81. There are only a couple of houses in either direction; beyond those, you really have to walk a good distance to see anything else. Right across from me there's what amounts to basically an empty overgrown field. It's never been sold. That day, I saw a man sitting in that empty field. It was quite a shock. He looked like he was trying to get to his feet from a sitting position and couldn't quite seem to, so I was a little worried. I thought he might be sick or hurt or something. He was wearing a T-shirt, jeans, sandals and a kind of sun hat. He finally was able to get to his feet, and then he stood there, slowly looking up at the sky, tilting his head at the dark clouds up there in what appeared to be childlike wonder. Very slowly he began to raise his arms toward the sky, and it was at that point I stopped thinking of him as possibly injured and starting thinking of him as a little crazy. Homeless, maybe. At one point he seemed to look toward my house, and I moved away from the window and dropped the blinds. It was only about ten seconds afterward that I heard the town siren go off far away, something that only happens every six months or so, a test more than anything else. When I looked out the window again a few minutes later, that man was gone; there was no sign of him.

The next thing I remember in this chain of events was waking up in the middle of the night again in my bedroom, and hearing a thumping sound far away. It was like something thumping against the side of the house, something heavy falling against it. I got up and turned the lights on and walked around to that side of the house, near the kitchen. The sound did not repeat itself. I kept investigating though; I started down into the cellar, and as soon as I had the door at the top of the stairs open, I heard the thumping again. It was still on the same side of the house, definitely.

I went down the cellar steps. I didn't bother to turn on the light overhead, working in the dark to better enable me to see outside the cellar windows. On one of them, I saw three distinct handprints, pressed into the frost; it was very cold out. The handprints were of distinct sizes: a very large palm, a smaller one near that, and then a smaller one still. I don't know how long they might've been there, but I assumed it was a very recent occurrence. I live, as I've said, very far out in the country, preferring solitude over convenience. No one would have any reason to wander onto my property.

The days following that odd incident, I began to notice a higher-than-usual rate of police sirens floating toward me from far away, sometimes from the direction of Bricks Keller Road to the east, sometimes from the west. Four or five sirens a day sometimes, where it used to be one every two weeks or so. I thought maybe I was becoming hyper-attuned to them given my new tranquility; there was no TV or music to screen out those sounds anymore. I took to standing on my front lawn trying to figure out where the sirens were coming from. They always seemed so very far away. I would walk down the street and look in both directions. My mail still hadn't been picked up; it had now been several days. Without a phone I couldn't call the post office. It was then that I began to keep a crude chart on my desk, a chart with two columns: one for the date and the other column heading being simply, 'Cars on Road.' The numbers that I was making in the columns kept dropping. It used to be rare that a full day would go by without at least seven or eight cars going down my road, but soon there seemed to be none at all. At one point I even walked several hundred yards down the road to make sure there was nothing blocking it, some construction I didn't know about perhaps, but there was nothing. I began to regret that I didn't really know my neighbors a few hundred yards away at all. I would have liked to have knocked on their doors and ask them what was up, but I never did.

My plan when my new life of quiet had begun was to make biweekly walks to the tiny roadside grocery store two miles down the road to buy the things I couldn't grow myself. The trip I made

next was more for informational purposes than because I was running short of food. I headed out into a light drizzle. But when I got to A & J Grocery and Meats, it was shuttered and closed. Very strange; it was a Sunday morning, when they usually opened at 9, and it was certainly not a holiday.

Coming back home, I decided to knock on the door of the two people I actually did know on the road; they lived about midway between A & J and my house. They were a nice younger couple who I'd met at a function at the town library a couple months before. Two cars were in the driveway but Ellen and Sam didn't respond to my knocks, so I gave up quickly. About 75 feet down their driveway, I was stopped by some residual memory of having seen something in my peripheral vision. I turned around and walked back up to their house. On the screened-in back porch were a green plastic table and two white plastic chairs, the cheap kind you buy from the grocery store. On top of the table lay a spiral notebook, open to about the midpoint, and I could see the handwriting on one of the exposed pages, though I wasn't nearly close enough to make out any of the words. A pencil was lying on the carpeting about a foot away from the chair in which the writer had once been sitting. The pencil had never been picked up for some reason after most likely rolling or dropping off the table. The screen door was locked. The curtains inside were drawn.

I decided to double back and walk all the way into town, another hour by foot. I got there at about 1:30 in the afternoon, as the rain began to grow steadier. The town of Corry has a very small main street, home to a scattering of small businesses. There's a café and deli, an insurance office, an ancient movie theater also used by a local theater group to stage plays, two churches, and a post office. On a Sunday almost everything is closed, but now there was simply no sign of human life, none at all. I thought that was impossible. Not everything could be closed; things just didn't work that way. Usually the café was open and there were a few people on the streets. Now, there was no one. I stood at the head of Main Street, staring, waiting. At long last, a single car rolled by, headed down Easthead Street, a little too far away for me to see who was driving it, and driving quite slowly at that. I turned and started to walk back home down that lonely country road, past houses where there was no activity, no one on their lawns, no one getting in cars and going somewhere. I did break down finally and knock on the doors of both my remote neighbors, to no avail. At both houses, there were cars in the driveway.

I went back inside my house and sat for two hours trying to construct a scenario in which all of this made sense. I went down into the cellar as night began to fall and dug into my old steamer trunk. This is where I had buried a lot of my little electronic devices, as many as I could; my TV and computer were long gone. At the very bottom of the trunk, I found my clock radio. I pulled it out and went back upstairs and plugged it in.

I couldn't get a whole lot of stations clearly where I was, but I did hear a couple of the national feeds, stations still predictably playing whatever they usually played. That was strangely comforting. The more I cruised the dial, the more it was obvious that anything based locally was off the air. Static and white noise almost everywhere. I let the radio play that noise for a long time. Before I went to bed that night, after a few hours of trying to fruitlessly force my mind to escape into a book of backgammon problems, I flipped through the stations one more time and did come across something frightening way down the AM dial. Through a great deal of static there came the voice of one man saying, 'That's what we just don't understand. That's what we just do not understand.' He went on to say that he was the only one left who knew how to keep the signal going out, and that he was going to stay on for a while but he didn't know how long he was going to feel safe where he was. Then he said, 'For anyone who can hear this and might still be wondering what's happening, let me tell you what I know,' and then he began

to explain the situation in detail. His story lasted only eight terrible minutes, and then he moved away from the microphone, promising he would try to return a little later. I shut off the radio and climbed into bed. Then, with the information that anonymous announcer had revealed spinning in my head, I left the bedroom to lay on my couch in the living room, knowing that peaceful sleep might not come again for a very long time. Eventually sheer exhaustion put me under shortly before dawn, for just two hours.

All the next day, I merely sat and monitored to the radio, trying to get that feed back, but it had disappeared. I looked out the windows constantly, searching for the slightest sign of human life. I knew I had to take some sort of action before it became dark. I couldn't even summon the courage to trek back to my neighbors' houses and knock again. I was frozen in place. The hours passed in a blur; it became night and I began to become deeply afraid. I wanted terribly to hear that man's voice just one more time. Out of desperation and a sense that my house was the worst place I could possibly stay, I finally got moving at 11:30, which was four hours ago. Here is what happened then:

I left the house. It was very cold. I walked down the middle of the road looking intently at the few houses that lay to the north as I passed by them. None of them had lights on inside. I began to travel up all the driveways to look inside each parked car. At a little rancher just a few hundred yards shy of A & J, I got lucky: there were keys in the ignition of an old Nissan. I got in, started it, pulled out, and began to drive. I noticed quickly that I had a little less than a quarter tank of gas to work with.

I drove through Corry right down Main Street and I kept going. I drove about four more miles to Bakerton Road, which is a very long country stretch that leads to Route 57, two lanes going in each direction. I took the turn, drumming my hands nervously on the wheel. I was looking for a single set of headlights coming in the opposite direction, and of course none came.

I went twelve, fifteen miles, the high beams on. I rolled past a couple of gas stations that were closed. In houses there were sometimes specks of light: lamps left on or automatic security lights activated. But they meant nothing. I finally came to I-81, a major interstate highway, and I got the car up to about 65 miles per hour in the center lane, going ever northward. I was the only one on the highway. I turned on the radio and set it to scan automatically through every station again and again, hoping to catch the slightest moment of clarity through the static. At one point I did get a brief signal from a station playing an old Phil Collins song. When it ended, it looped right back to the beginning. And then again. And again.

I started to become very conscious indeed of my fuel level. At one point I slowed the car in the middle of I-81 and I turned around, bumping over the grass median. I drove all the way back to Main Street in Corry. I parked the car on the side of the road, in front of the post office, and got out, shivering in the cold, in the dark. I walked down a couple of the side streets, not sure of what I hoped to accomplish. I walked through the little cemetery that lay beside the Presbyterian Church, then started to cross the trim little campus of a military school for ages 12-18. I quickly felt too exposed, deeply uncomfortable, so I stopped and retraced my steps. It felt better to be near tall buildings of some kind where I could linger in the shadows, out of sight.

I was ready to get back in the car when I looked down Main Street one last time. Three blocks away, a man was standing on the sidewalk. He was only a silhouette. He obviously must have seen me. I was standing under one of the streetlights. Neither of us moved. I turned my body toward the Nissan. It was only about eight steps away, and as I dug for the keys, I saw in my peripheral vision on my right side, well down a side street, Wellington Avenue, that someone

was running at me from about a hundred yards away, right down the center of the pavement. This person was holding some kind of oversized knife high above his head. He was running as fast as he could toward me. I bolted for the car. I got in, gunned the ignition, peeled out incredibly quickly. I roared down Main Street. I went right through a red light and past that figure that had watched me motionlessly. I could see a little more of this face now; a bearded man in his forties maybe, wearing a heavy coat. Then I was past him in an instant. I wasn't sure I'd have enough fuel to make it all the way back to my house, and in the end, I could tell I was on fumes, but I made it. I made it.

The clock radio says it's 3:59 a.m. The Nissan sits in my driveway, pretty much useless to me now. I'm sitting in a chair in the middle of my cellar as I record this on a little mini-cassette recorder I've had for almost fifteen years, which I had to dig out from the bottom of my steamer trunk. I've kept it totally dark in the basement, the way I want it. I am now holding a knife of my own, a steak knife from the kitchen.

About twenty minutes ago there was a knock on the front door, which is now securely locked. I had been sitting on my living room sofa. I didn't wait for the knock to repeat itself this time. I got up and went over to the door and rested my forehead against it. Sarah's voice came from outside once again, and she was asking again if I would let her in, please, please. Her voice was even more frail and slurred than it had been that other night. She was still Sarah, recognizably Sarah, but very different. I told her that I couldn't allow her in, I wouldn't. Sarah said that in that case, they were *all* going to come in for me whether I liked it or not; she wasn't alone now. This I could verify was true by listening very, very closely. I could sense the shuffling of feet outside on the sidewalk, more than just Sarah's. I didn't know how many were out there, so I asked Sarah to tell me. 'Why don't you look out the window and see?' she asked me, but I wouldn't do that. She told me through the door that everyone else in town was like her now, everyone except me. I asked her what it felt like to be dead. There was a long, long pause. I could hear the wind outside, displacing leaves in the gutters above, making the elm tree in the back yard rustle and creak. Sarah replied to me in a voice as sad as I have ever heard in my life. She said, 'Oh, it's terrible. It's terrible.'

About five minutes ago, I finally gathered the courage here in the cellar to finally open my eyes and look out the south window, and I saw someone out there in the dark kneeling and peering in. Then I turned to the north window and there was someone there too, crouching down. It looked like a woman. She put her hand on the window and made an impression there in the frost. Her face was very close to the glass.

The radio is playing and that lonely faraway announcer is back, speaking to whoever is left. He's talking about what he always thought he'd do if he absolutely knew he was about to die, about to die in the next ten seconds. He's saying he would want to try to say something very silly, make some little gallows humor quip, like they do sometimes in action movies. He wonders if anyone has ever really had the presence of mind, the black, bleak wit, to pull that off. Personally, I know what I myself will say when I hear the front door being forced open upstairs. It will be just two words, really: *Help me*.

doppelganger

The strangest place I ever lived was a house out in the country three years ago; it was attached to a property where they held a Renaissance Fair every summer. During the winter the owner left town and rented out his house, and I found myself with some peace and quiet on the edge of the woods. The owner walked me through them that first day. There were all these abandoned facades and wooden stages and shacks along a network of trails, some of them simulating medieval designs. I liked it out there, except when I looked out of the bedroom window to the west, I could see a tall fake tower far away, sticking out just a little over the treetops, looking pretty convincing. When you got close to it, it was just a connected series of steps built against the flat gray façade of a castle, but a couple of times that winter it brought back a dream I've had since I was a kid, where I'm lying with a broken back on a staircase, looking up at a dark figure above me, who's glad I'm dying. I didn't like looking out the window at night and seeing the silhouette of the tower out there.

But it was a good winter. The only person who ever came over was the guy who ran the local market. He called himself Grover. We'd noodle around on the guitar and keyboards and make terrible sangria.

One day in January, there was a knock at my door. Standing on the stoop was a guy of about thirty. He looked like a surfer really: shaggy blonde hair, very tanned, nice fellow. His name was Randy Coates. He explained that he worked as a private investigator for a small firm in the city. He was there confidentially and in violation of his job agreement, but he had information he felt he simply needed to share. I was all ears, I can assure you.

About two months before, he'd been assigned some tasks relating to a client of the firm's, a Russian man who was living in Zelenograd at the time. This Russian client had given the firm two names, and he paid to have these people located. I was one of the two people.

I had no idea who this man was. Leonid Mozenkhov was his name. He was the son of a very wealthy Russian banker and politician. So Randy Coates had gone about the business of tracking me down in the city, and he'd relayed my whereabouts, which he'd been paid by the firm to do, to his boss, who in turn sent this information to Mozenkhov. Coates had been giving his boss a report on his progress when he was suddenly told, Oh, don't go any further with this, the case had ended because Mozenkhov was crazy. That was the boss's description. Mozenkhov had been arrested for attacking a total stranger on the street in Omsk, and he was set to go on trial, and he was refusing to pay for this and that, so Coates was told, Drop what you're doing with this, there's no point in going on with it.

At this point Coates got a little curious. He looked into this attack, called up a couple of Russian newspapers. And he saw from a photograph that Leonid Mozenkhov could be the identical twin of both myself and that other man Coates had been asked to locate, a convicted felon in Chicago. Absolutely identical. The three of us had the same face. Never before in history, before the internet, could such a coincidence be brought to light simply because of powerful search engines and software. We had entered a time where your exact doppelgangers could be found online. We've always suspected they were out there, but now, they're truly a visible, tangible reality.

Leonid Mozenkhov was a schizophrenic, Coates had found out. He had spent a great deal of time either homeless or in hospitals since he was a teenager, being arrested four times. He had one main obsession, which was that there were people in the world trying to *be* him, trying to steal possession of his face, and they needed to be stopped before they did something terrible for which he would be blamed. The poor soul he had attacked was another one of these doppelhangers. He'd jumped him with a knitting needle on the street and punctured the man's lung before he was dragged away, screaming.

It was Coates' theory that a lot of money had changed hands, Mozenkhov's father's money, to keep him out of jail and the psych ward over the years, but their luck was finally running out. Coates had phoned that felon in Chicago—who was a somewhat notorious drug dealer—and given him the same information he was now giving me, because he was convinced Mozenkhov was a dangerous person sitting on a lot of money, and we both should be aware of that. It seemed like the decent thing to do. As of that moment, Mozenkhov was walking the streets, back in Zelenograd as far as anyone knew, but perhaps free to travel while he awaited trial, and unfortunately, information had been passed on to him two weeks before about where I lived.

I thanked Coates, this good Samaritan who felt strongly enough about this to risk his job, and he left. I lay on the sofa, thinking about my options. The most obvious was to go to the police, but I was an ocean away from this Mozenkhov, and they would certainly tell me there was nothing they could do unless he were in the states. I wasn't about to go to the FBI or something; that seemed impossibly elaborate to me. I couldn't hire Coates to monitor the situation because it was too much of a conflict for him. So I decided to wait just a little while, wait and see.

After another ten days had gone by, the whole thing started to seem more absurd. I spent some time online reading about Mozenkhov's very influential and very corrupt father, but could find nothing about Leonid himself. What I did not do was mount any sort of search for my doppelgangers. I had no desire to confront a reality that surreal. I kept on with my quiet winter and started making plans to move in March when the lease was up.

The phone rang one drizzly afternoon and I heard the voice of Randy Coates. He was on the west coast, at San Diego Airport, on a different case. Though I couldn't hire him to keep an eye open for developments, he had done a little more research for free. He had called to tell me that it seemed Leonid Mozenkhov was no longer in Russia—that he had, in fact, been permitted, dangerous as he was, to board a flight to New York City two nights before, four hundred miles away from me, and almost a thousand from the current known residence of that felon in Chicago who owned my face too.

Coates recommended to me the name of an investigator he knew personally who could be hired to trace the man from there, but he thought at this point that police involvement was the first step and couldn't hurt. I thanked him profusely and hung up. I would take his advice right away.

I called the police and they were very helpful. I would go in the next morning to elaborate with them, and the private investigator agreed over the phone to put things in motion right away even before I could meet with him at four the next day. My four-hour phone call marathon ended at about five, so I was just facing one night of real uneasiness there in the house. I was so stressed and exhausted by this sudden twist of things that I hung up the phone and laid right down on my bed upstairs to sleep for a while. The dream came back to me, that dream I used to have. This time as I lay on the staircase, which seemed to be either indoors or out, that dark

figure standing above me, I was able to cry out for the first time. And that was what woke me up in the dark, and I decided I didn't want to be in the house that night.

I rolled over on top of the bed and picked up the phone again and called Grover, who was likely about to close up the market, to see if I could sit in on the weekly late night folk jam session he and some of his more heavily drinking friends staged in his basement on Fridays. He said Sure, come on over, and then he asked me why I hadn't popped in that afternoon, and I told him I had gotten sidetracked by some real strangeness which I'd explain to him later, and I'd been tethered to the phone. He said, *But you walked past the store at around three, I saw you strolling down the shoulder of Cattail Road, where were you coming from?* I said, *No, I didn't leave the house today.*

Well, one of us is crazy, Grover said, *we can hash that out when you get over here.* Instead of pressing him, I found myself saying goodbye and setting the phone gently on my bed. I turned the lamp on beside it and sat, my mind racing.

I was going to leave the house that very moment. That's all there was to it. I looked out the window toward the west. I thought about the shacks and temporary structures in those woods that one could hide or even camp in, for days and days before anyone knew you were there. The little cabin that was the storefront for a swordmaker when the Renaissance Fair was on. The trailer where people bought sandwiches.

I hadn't walked the trails for more than a week, it had been so cold. I forced myself to look at the façade of the tower a half mile away, feeling suddenly that I was meant to have rented this house, that the dream's meaning would make itself clear if I went to that façade and waited in the dark to see what happened.

My car keys were already in my pocket. My wallet I tucked into my jeans, and I got up and walked into the outer hallway, which was still dark. I wouldn't feel better now until I was at Grover's, and I wasn't above heading from there to the nearest hotel twenty miles away if it meant feeling safer.

The house had been dark for almost two hours by then, a full two hours. That's a lot of time. It was ten steps to the top of my staircase, and though usually I would never peer over the upper railing to the foyer down below before I moved to the top step, this time I did, unconsciously. And I stopped immediately, before I got there, and flinched back two feet so I was safely out of the line of sight that began from the front door and stretched straight up the fourteen carpeted steps to the top floor.

Yes, it was very dark; just a little blue light peeking into the house through the tall thin window panes flanking the front door. Someone was sitting on the welcome mat down there in my foyer, with their back against the door, just sitting, knees drawn up to their chin, as if to scrunch up and become very small.

I didn't see how that intruder down there couldn't have heard the creaking of the floor above him. He must have known I was moving up there.

I didn't move then for almost thirty seconds, listening for any sound. I turned my head, looked at my bedroom door twenty feet away—and even closer, the bathroom in the hallway. That is where I went.

Inside, I closed the door as slowly as I possibly could, the old wood creaking. I locked the door, frail as it was, and stood there in the dark. My cellphone was in my pocket, fully charged. I stepped into the shower stall, as far away from the door as I could, and I called 911. And how hard it was to bring myself to utter a single word, because each one felt so loud, each one felt like it was giving me away, and each syllable I uttered blocked out an instant of sound that might have meant life and death to me. I kept it real short. I told them there was an intruder in my home and I was hiding from him. They would send out help right away.

Then, just ... quiet. The endurance test of my sanity began. I began to count backwards mentally from eight minutes, which I arbitrarily decided was how long I needed to hold on before the police came. I could see myself in the mirror there in the dark and that was bad, so I drew the shower curtain closed to conceal myself totally.

It's quite something, the sounds that came to me in that quiet. The crickets and the wind outside, the strange ticking of water in the pipes, my breathing, and random creaks as the old house—a living, breathing thing itself—settled and stretched and shrunk all around me in unnoticeable ways.

At some point I lost my mental clock; it stopped working, I lost track of it. But there must have still been a couple of minutes left when there came from down below the unmistakable creaking sound of feet on the staircase, moving upwards with unusual speed and determination.

I barely had time to feel my heart begin to pound furiously in my chest when something more terrifying came, which was a sharp crack, a gunshot, and then a second one, muffling an angry male voice. I instinctively dropped where I was in the shower stall, putting my hands over my ears, my eyes going so wide it felt like I'd never be able to close them again.

I was just barely able to hear that same deep male voice call out, saying if I was up there somewhere, it was safe to come down. The man's English was perfect, no Russian accent.

I heard sirens as I left the bathroom. Standing in the dark near the door that Leonid Mozenkhov had jimmed open as I slept was a man named Michael Tower, a convicted drug dealer and someone who had been acquitted of murder in St. Paul, Minnesota four years before.

Mozenkhov lay dead on my staircase, halfway up, face to the ceiling. Tower, who had taken matters into his own hands and had been stalking this psychopath for thirty-six straight hours in order to pre-emptively remove this threat from his already precarious life, and who had pulled up at my house just in time to intervene, certainly had a good ninety seconds to get out the back door before the police pulled up ... but he didn't.

It wasn't that he was voluntarily giving himself up. I think that like me, he was just completely frozen by the scene he was now a part of, in which three men with totally identical faces were within fifteen feet of each other: one of them dead, one his killer, and one a coward. I still

remember how Tower looked up the staircase at me, with a mix of disgust and wonder at the awful tricks that life plays on us, some of which create more ghastly memories than others.

graffiti

When I was younger I got hit with a community service sentence for an act of cemetery trespassing—I'll tell you about it someday maybe—and the judge gave me the assignment of spending forty hours cleaning the graffiti from an old, old train tunnel that doubled now as a bike path, way out in the woodsy part of the county. But I had a full-time job already, and the only time I could chip away at this task was late at night. So I was given a weird-smelling solvent, a wire brush, rubber gloves, and a dust mask, and for ten straight nights I was supposed to drive out to the tunnel. It was a mile walk down the path from the nearest neighborhood after I parked, lugging all this stuff, and I methodically scrubbed graffiti off all those uneven stone surfaces in the middle of the night. The lighting inside the tunnel was terrible, too: dim, a weak orange color.

Thirty-five years of graffiti had to come off. Most of it was random nonsense or profanity. Two times I came across something a little interesting: a very good little sketch of a woman's face in profile, no caption, done in just a few strokes of very old paint; it came off pretty easily. I suppose what stuck with me is that it was there twice, the second face virtually identical to the first, only ten feet away from the original. An ancient piece of skilled art amongst all the clutter.

On the night after I scrubbed away both of those faces, I got a bit of a shock. It was about one in the morning, not a sound around me on that path, except sometimes the wind would get caught up in the tunnel somehow, whistle for a minute, and then die. I was going about my business, standing on a ladder I'd hauled all the way in there, and I looked toward the end of the tunnel, and there was someone there, fifty yards away. Standing at the entrance. It was tough to make out much detail, but it was a man and a woman, holding hands. They didn't move, didn't walk forward. They were too far away for me to even call out hello, really, so I said nothing, just turned back to my business. But I sensed they hadn't gone anywhere, and I turned again and there they still were. So I very intentionally tried to screen them out and work on the stone in front of me. If I were to hear footsteps, I'd look up, but not otherwise. And eventually, they just weren't there anymore. Maybe they headed down the path, or into the woods, I didn't know.

A couple of nights later, I found another face. I was on the ladder again, it was pretty high. This one was done just like the others, except this one was partially covered by other graffiti. I went to work scrubbing it away.

About a half hour later, I looked toward the north end of the tunnel and ... there they were again. That couple. Holding hands. I was even farther away from them than I'd been that first night, but I suddenly felt very afraid. Same spot, same behavior, not walking forward, and I hadn't seen them approach the tunnel. Couldn't really see what they were wearing, or much beyond the fact that she had long hair and he was much taller than her.

I guess you had to be there to understand why it was that I was so scared to call out to them. I couldn't bring myself to make a sound because making a sound might somehow ... cause something to happen. Silence felt like it was safer. This time I did see them turn and walk away, down the path. They were beyond the light's reach in just a few steps, and then they vanished into the dark.

The next day I went to the library. I felt like reading up on anything I could find about the tunnel. This was twenty years ago, and the internet didn't produce much on the topic. I had no hopes of finding anything, but there was a book about local history, and to my amazement, it was about local legends. Self-published by the look of it, poorly researched, specious. The author was a biology teacher who taught at a nearby community college. That book contained a full page description of an incident in 1969 involving a man named Rolf Tanner and his girlfriend, Melody March, both twenty-one years old. He had been arrested for his involvement in her death. It came out that they'd had a suicide pact: She had stepped in front of a train coming through the tunnel where I had spent the last several nights, but at the last second he had lost his nerve and only watched as she was struck. While awaiting trial, he would walk down the tracks and then sketch her face on the stone walls. I never found any proof that this part of this story was true; just that they were real people, with a real pact, and Tanner had been sentenced to a few years in prison, where he hung himself. I suppose the faces could have been done by anyone.

But this story really isn't about stereotypes of ghosts. Such clichés, really, I feel silly even talking about them. It's about terror, what terror feels like, because I felt it in its most concentrated, purest form that night, there in the tunnel where the tracks had been torn up decades ago and smooth pavement laid down for bicyclists and hikers.

Just walking into it at nine o'clock or so was hard for me after reading what I'd read. My footsteps seemed so loud somehow. I was thinking of where the nearest human presence was, and I figured the nearest house to that part of the trail three-quarters of a mile away. I was scared from the first moment I set foot on the path that night, and by eleven or so, my neck was stiff and sore from fear. My head was pounding. I couldn't even listen to music. I just scrubbed till my hands ached, as they did every night, just scrubbed and tried not to look around. Sometimes the wind caused a little gathering of leaves to whip together in a spiral a foot off the ground, and this happened near my right foot, and it made me tremble for some reason.

It was at about one that I saw the face on the stones, beside a bunch of oversized and messy random dollar signs somebody had drawn. It was a male face, done in the same style as the woman's, but not nearly as well. Not much detail except for a single tear emerging from the left eye. I don't know why I hadn't seen it before. I knew I'd looked right at that spot several times.

And when I turned I saw them again, I saw the couple. But this time they were standing inside the tunnel, just a few feet. They started to walk toward me this time, hand in hand.

Fear. There was suddenly a taste in my mouth like gasoline, weird, peppery almost, and my saliva dried up. Their footsteps echoed on the cement path. When they got close enough that I could see their faces somewhat, a trickle of sweat crept into my eye and momentarily blinded it. At the same moment the thudding in my head seemed to swallow one of my eardrums; I couldn't hear out of my left ear. My stomach began to pulse, pulse like a heart.

All I remember at the end is that she had a thick strand of hair in her mouth as if she were biting it, and their locked hands were moving, their fingers squirming around each other's. And one of his eyes, I think it was the right, was much wider than the other, like it was being propped open by an invisible stick. Then everything must have gone black.

The doctors told me my blood pressure had dropped to a near fatal level. That corrected itself pretty fast; the real problem afterward was my fingers. They were torn up pretty badly. I left bloodstains all over that man's face on the bricks. I must have clawed at it, trying to rip it off with my bare hands, for several minutes before I passed out.

And guess what? I was successful. On my right palm, that tear-stained man's face remains etched in something that's not ink and not blood. It's been twenty-two years to the night since I somehow pulled the face right off the stone and onto my flesh permanently.

It doesn't hurt or anything. I've had my chances over the years to tattoo over it, maybe even get a skin graft. I tell people who ask that it's a tribute to a nonexistent, long-dead friend. And, in a way, it is.

hometown

One night last month I drove back to the little town where I grew up, a place named Ellawyd. Over the last thirty years it's slowly lost a third of its population, just kind of faded. But not because the jobs nearby disappeared, or crime came in. You'll never find anyone who will admit it, but I think a lot of people left because of the spider. Now it's just this forgotten place that barely rates a sign as you go in.

When I was a kid there was a professor who lived in town, a local character, this super-brilliant entomologist who traveled all over the world, and who was apparently not nice at all, socially inadequate. The guy's name was Patrick Dollar. In the mid-seventies he went to Papua, New Guinea to study the insects there—in particular a kind of mygalomorph, a tarantula, that almost no one had ever seen. He was apparently set on getting credit for bringing one back to North America for study.

They warned him at the college, apparently, about the tribes in that area, how you could never really be sure of where you stood with them. He was convinced these indigineous people accepted him and trusted him. He was in the rainforest for three long stretches over the course of seven years. And he meant to get that tarantula.

At the end of his third stretch in the rainforest, something changed, something subtle in the politics of the tribe that he never saw coming. And one night they gave him something to drink which was meant to harm him permanently. Poison is not quite the right word. But his life was basically over the moment he took that first swallow. His mind was over, anyway. He vanished for a while, like six months, and most people thought he must be dead, but he was eventually found back in the states wandering the side of Grotny Road, which is two blocks from the house

where I grew up. He didn't have a wife or kids or even friends to help him, so as his behavior got stranger, there was no one to try to get him into a hospital, and the law couldn't really do anything as long as he wasn't in any danger, or threatening anyone.

That was 1981, when he came back to Ellawyd, the same year we moved away to Monroeville. And I would hear about what was going on in Ellawyd from time to time, and when I got my driver's license I drove back for a day, then I visited once every few years maybe. Every time, the decline of the town was noticeable. Nobody wanted to say why it was happening. But there are things that can make people go away because they're just too disturbing to see or think about. So one day you just decide it's time to move closer to your job, or take a new one across the state, or find a better school district, and you lie to yourself that it's not because of something else.

I drove back last month because it turned out the story of the spider was still alive, after thirty-five years. I heard it again in some bar, and this guy said, *It's still there, it's still there*. So I drove down Route 30 about sixty miles and went through town late on a Sunday night, when there wasn't a soul out anywhere.

I cruised along Main Street, looking at the places I used to go: the sub shop, the library, the old convenience store. I drove by my old house, which was for sale again, like a lot of places were. You could always find a place in Ellawyd pretty cheap if you wanted.

I parked and I did the nostalgia tour on foot, and a lot of it really was pure nostalgia, but I was always keeping watch of the shadows for the spider. I'd never seen it first-hand, though I knew plenty of people who had, a lot of people I'd grown up with. A one of a kind arachnid that had no business being here. And I wonder to this day how kids must have reacted to it, even though it was never around during the day, so a lot of them would have been spared that scare, I guess. But still, you'd think one of them at some point would have just gone after it. Maybe it had happened, I don't know.

I walked around Promontory Pond, then I went over to the old kickball field beside our elementary school, where my athletic glory had reached its apex. The sliding board which had doubled as first base was still there, about a hundred feet away from the streetlight which was always third base. I climbed up the metal ladder and sat at the very top and looked at the school, all dark and silent under the starry sky, not much changed in thirty-five years. I thought, Why do people do this, what do we gain from going back home, other than a sadness it's tough to define.

I'd been there for a few minutes when I heard a small thump from behind me. I craned my neck and looked down the sliding board.

The spider was almost all the way at the bottom, clinging to the side of it, half on, half off. Who knows how long it had been there, hanging. It slowly began to drag its weight over onto the slide.

Patrick Dollar was dressed in black thrift store clothes, from what I could see in the dark. He was incredibly thin, and his hair was long and ragged and gray. He must have been in his mid-seventies by then, three and a half decades since he'd taken that drink that broke his mind. After he was fully on the slide, he kind of scrunched up and didn't move for a while. The top of his head stayed very still, his face pressed into the cold metal surface of the slide. Then, little by little, he reached one arm out higher on it and clamped it down, flattening his palm.

I waited. It was almost a full minute before he finally started to reach the other arm out. And I jumped off the top of the slide, and I ran all the way back to my car on May Drive, I never stopped.

If you go to Ellawyd, it's known that the spider doesn't come out till full dark. It likes the corners and the gaps between buildings. I'm surprised I saw it where I did, but I suppose the elementary school is good for exploring undisturbed, lots of surfaces to crawl on and places to hide. The spider won't harm you; it's never harmed anyone. The police don't bother it much, apparently. There's no point. And the town has always, and *will* always, let it be.

The Crack

(The sound of wind and circling gulls rises; we are on a remote, musty plain.)

*'Gravel shifted in my shoes, between my toes...
there is no time to shake it loose.
And dirt in my pockets,
fine as ash.
The further I shuffled over the earth
the wider it became,
stretching like a rotted hide
towards the mountains.
My knees were bleeding again.
I began to see the forms,
Flickering phantoms of the land on either side of the road.
Is it trying to tell me something?
To manifest in corporeal form to warn me
in a language I'll understand?'*

NARRATOR

Now that Michael Spinell has returned, seven years later, to the site where this story happened, he thinks he is finally ready to talk about the long walk of June 2009.

MICHAEL

(speaking at the site, shuffling from foot to foot, uncomfortable)

Not much has changed ... I don't understand why they wouldn't block at least the beginning of the road off, or put up No Trespassing signs. What's to stop someone else from coming here?

It's not responsible.

(The outdoor sounds fade out.)

NARRATOR

In May of that year, Michael was a biology undergraduate at Lakeland College in Alberta, Canada, unsure of what to do with himself during the coming summer break. He saw an interesting handwritten ad posted on a bulletin board in the Student Union, and tore a phone number slip from it. In messy script, it invited anyone who wanted to join a silent group meditation hike on something called the Strongbone Road, north of Fort St. John, to call for more information.

MICHAEL

I'd actually heard of the Strongbone Road and thought, well, this was a strange place for an outdoors excursion ... but I was into hiking and a lot of new age stuff, so I made the call. A guy named Peter Ricks answered the phone. He sort of talked in a very slow, hard-to-hear way, a monotone. He said the walk was going to be pretty ambitious; he wanted to do all one hundred and thirty miles of the road with just enough other people to make it physically safe to do. I'd never done more than fifty miles, but the road was perfectly flat and the weather would probably be fairly mild.

NARRATOR

Peter Ricks accentuated that he wanted to observe silence as they went, with each of the hikers practicing their own meditation individually. That was fine with Michael. After the recent death of a close friend, a breakup, and problems in school, a week walking mindlessly in silence and in the middle of absolutely nowhere sounded like a good idea.

Gail Greenlove has been chief constable of the Fort St. John Police Department since 2008.

GAIL GREENLOVE

The Strongbone Road went from Rose Prairie almost to Fort Nelson. It was constructed in the sixties, jointly by two trucking companies by special lease from the government of Alberta. It only had the one purpose, and that was to haul petrochemicals between two facilities. To call it a road was actually generous; it was unlined white asphalt. No signage, no signs of life for the whole length through the plain west of Kahntah. And just flat, flat and empty.

It became impassable in winter very fast, and Belcافتa Oil and Chase Colney didn't want to spend a lot of money maintaining it from year to year. There was no outside traffic except for emergency vehicles. They'd planned an extension all the way to Nelson Forks, but it wasn't ever funded. Then in 1986 or 1987, I forget which, Chase Colney went bust and the road became completely unused, more or less. By the mid-nineties it was abandoned.

NARRATOR

Peter Ricks called Michael two weeks after their first contact to confirm that he still wanted to go on the walk. There would be just two other people on it, both women who lived near the Lakeland campus and had responded to the ad. They would meet in Goodlow on the night of June 2 and start out the next day.

MICHAEL

I was worried about water mostly, but Peter said it would be okay because the road was dotted with pumps which the government required to be in operation for safety reasons, and there were lakes not too far away, so that was OK. Our packs had to be kind of heavy to carry food for five days, so I was hoping my legs could take it. I made sure to talk to some friends about precautions to take. All of them thought I was insane, they thought the boredom factor would send me off the road in two days. But I didn't have anything to lose at all.

NARRATOR

Michael drove to Gwillim Lake Provincial Park and camped out there, then drove on to Goodlow to meet his walking companions in a diner just outside of town.

Peter Ricks was a tall, morose-looking man in his early forties, with a deep bass voice that made it sound, as it had on the phone, like he'd never had a day of joy in his life. He wore a t-shirt bearing the cheerful image of the advertising icon known as Kool Aid Man. He would also wear it the next day when the hike started, a detail Michael would not forget. He did not ask for the reasons any of them were there.

Also going along was Shannon Francis, a very educated and urbane woman in her thirties who was involved heavily in many liberal causes.

MICHAEL

Shannon was really energetic, she sort of bristled with it like she was always caffeinated. Very well spoken and philosophical. I think she questioned everything about life, but in a very wide open, childlike way, a healthy way.

NARRATOR

Finally there was Emma Bailey, who seemed to give conflicting information about what she did for a living. Michael couldn't quite piece together whether she was a coffee roaster, a veterinary assistant, or a full-time student.

MICHAEL

She, ah ... she had a strange stare about her, you know, and ... sometimes she would lapse into a silence in the middle of a thought, and just gaze at the table. She had this very shrill, nervous laugh and she was endlessly fussing with the tangles in her hair, endlessly, it was really long. She didn't eat anything at all; the rest of us were really loading up, but I think she had a soda, that was it.

GAIL GREENLOVE

The walk was not technically legal. The Strongbone Road was considered under the jurisdiction of the government, and it had banned all travel on it to avoid liability, which was understandable. The only other real concern for the walkers, aside from maybe the occasional coyote, was what they called the Yawny plant. It grew wild in the area and it would give you a similar effect to mild hallucinogenic mushrooms if the roots reached a certain temperature, which happened in late spring and summer. Not tremendously powerful, so there wasn't even a trade in it, but one or two truckers back in the day would tell you it could cause a pretty catastrophic misperception of direction, so you had to watch out. They chewed it a bit as an upper, mostly just for something to do out there; it could get viciously boring on the road.

MICHAEL

The next morning we had a ride coming to take us from the motel, and just before he got there I was in my room, just kind of staring out the window, it was still dark, the sun wasn't quite up yet ... and I saw Emma sitting in a chair on the sidewalk outside her own room, the lights were still on in the parking lot. And some guy was slowly moving away from her, and he was talking back at her really aggressively as he moved. It was like they'd been having an argument. I could just make him out saying one sentence, he was saying 'If I have to go to the police about you, I will.' Then he disappeared into one of the rooms. No idea who he was, she could only just have met him. So I waited a bit, and I took my backpack and I went out there to say hello, and it was almost like she didn't even remember who I was.

(Now, we hear a car bumping along open terrain; Michael is inside it.)

It was still kind of dark when we came up this way, so I don't remember too much of the scenery, but we were all amazed at how the trees just stopped suddenly and it was just this, just this scrub and desert, for about ten miles before we even got there. It feels not that long now.

(When we hear him next, he's on the Strongbone Road, as he was at the beginning.)

MICHAEL

So the access road is gone now; that's one difference. It was totally in a shambles, it was blocked off by these big long cement barriers. We were let out right here, and there was a signpost with nothing on it except a bunch of engineering statistics, not even the name of the place, or the names of the companies. Peter told us that those silo-looking storage buildings out there—all the way out there, it's a bit too hazy to make them out too well—they were all that was left of Chase Colney, literally a ghost town.

NARRATOR

The Strongbone Road went north toward the horizon and disappeared into it. It was sixty feet wide, white and gray, unlined. The scene looked to Michael like a child's minimalist drawing of a landscape. No trees, no brush, no rocks, only the faintest long tendrils of scrub wandering across the road's surface like searching fingers.

The four of them checked their supplies and Peter released the driver, who turned around and disappeared quickly in a cloud of dust. Some sort of introductory remark from Peter was expected, perhaps a cheerful quotation or inspiring comment, but instead he simply hoisted his pack and began to walk, and they all lapsed immediately into the silence that had been informally legislated. Emma's tattered pack seemed to Michael to be way too big for her; Shannon's had been custom-fit for her at some expense at REI. Peter's looked incredibly well-worn, as if he'd had it with him all his life. Michael had borrowed his brother's, and had received several withering warnings about carrying too heavy a load.

But the weight of his burden never even had a chance to become a real problem. Of far greater concern, he would learn only long after his ordeal, was the people he was walking with.

GAIL GREENLOVE

Shannon Francis was from Claysmore. Her husband had died two years before in a helicopter crash, and soon after that she discovered his secret life, with a secret family that happened to be buried under a mountain of debt. Since then she'd been raising their son alone, he was ten.

She had very little money, she'd been working as a yoga instructor. And she'd been teetering on the edge of a nervous breakdown for about eighteen months.

NARRATOR

Her son's name was Connor. An extraordinarily volatile child, he was given to intense tantrums and ostracized by other children. Shannon, who in the two hours he talked to her came off to Michael as one of the sharpest and most self-aware people he'd ever met, had gone into therapy to fight off bouts of intense depression. Her relentless activism and many social activities kept her sane. But shortly before the posting for the walk had appeared, she hit bottom and fled to the mountains for a week after dropping Connor off at her parents' house. She stayed in a small open wooden shelter and almost became fatally lost in the wilderness. Weeks later, neighbors had found her wandering a road near her house in a daze after getting into a screaming match with her son about a trip to the mall, during which he threw a wall mirror almost as big as she was down a staircase at her. She had clung to the walk as her longest escape yet from the nightmare her life had suddenly become.

GAIL GREENLOVE

Three days before she left for Goodlow, the police had come to question Connor about the whereabouts of a neighborhood boy who lived a few doors down and hadn't come home for dinner. They slowly wore down his lies and he led them deep into the woods; that was where he'd tied the boy to a tree and left him there, in 35 degree weather, about four hours before. Ms. Francis had collapsed on the floor and begun to claw at her face so badly she'd had to be tranquilized.

MICHAEL

After about maybe four hours, I was thinking about my brother and how he said I'd go crazy with boredom, because the scenery was ... completely unchanging. The road had no deviation or turns at all, they'd cut it intentionally that way, so there wouldn't be any obstructions, no rises, no falls, they wanted to save gas, right? There were no hills ... every step felt exactly identical to the one before it. The only thing that varied was the strands of the Yawny plant, they were all over the road, it was peeking between the cracks in the asphalt even. But beyond that, you got this sense real fast that your path was meaningless, you may as well have been walking on a treadmill with a fake sky as a backdrop, on a scroll, and that was disorienting. I'd grown up in Michigan and I'd never seen terrain like this before. There was something about it that was unbearably bleak. I had figured the mountains might be a reference point, but they were too far away, we couldn't see them.

NARRATOR

There were no real breaks; the group had all agreed to keep moving freely anytime someone else stopped for water or food or to walk off the road a bit for whatever reason, and the four of them had all broken apart substantially by mid-afternoon. No one wanted to rest together; it was quiet and isolation they had all bought into, and that is exactly what they got. Contact with the outside world would be very difficult, as cellphone reception on the plain was almost nonexistent.

MICHAEL

At one point I was sitting there eating almonds and a fruit bar or something, and when I looked back and forward I was totally alone. Just me in the desert, thinking OK, this is going to

be tougher than I thought. Not physically. Mentally. Eventually Emma walked past me, she didn't even look at me.

(When we next hear him, is out on the road again.)

This is one of the spigots, they were every ten miles or so, I think. You can see how it blends into the landscape, you could walk right past it if you weren't careful ...

(He primes it.)

Still working. The water is kind of warm and awful, but it's drinkable. I was standing here filling one of my bottles and I felt something on my ankle, brushing my skin, and I looked down and saw a thick strand of the Yawny scraping me above my sock, and I cringed and kicked it away, it was totally irrational.

And this is where I more or less stopped seeing Peter, when he was filling up too. After that ... At first, you know, I thought, Well, he just doesn't need much rest, but he's out there somewhere, up ahead. I would see Shannon up ahead, then I would pass her, and then she would catch up to me; it went on and on like that, but right away, Peter got way, way ahead. That was a little scary; he was supposed to be the leader of this thing, and he was basically gone.

(Now he is indoors again.)

That first day, Emma was the first one to stop. She put a mat down and turned on her side, she was using her pack as a pillow. That was about an hour after night fell. She didn't even bother pitching her tent. Peter had told us back at the diner that there were wild animals sometimes, but she didn't seem to care. Then a few miles later, I spotted Shannon. She was way off the road, and she'd built a fire; she'd taken some classes on outdoor survival back when she was a real hippie, she said. She always smiled at me when I passed her.

I kept going for as long as I could. I had a one-person tent with a big hole in it. I think I only slept for a couple of hours, and my dreams consisted of one thing, which was a repeating horizontal pattern of black and yellow, like my brain had a loose wire. That was it, very foreign and weird. I was cold, my feet really hurt bad. I wondered what my mind would be like after another two or three days on this awful road.

NARRATOR

When Emma Bailey was fifteen years old, police reports would eventually reveal, she ran away from home and an abusive stepmother. She lived in the woods for seven months while she worked at a series of minimum wage jobs in Calgary. One day she snuck into a summer carnival and merely wandered around, taking in the sights, too poor to afford the rides. At around dusk, headed off the property, she tried to take a shortcut between two big tents. She would later tell a psychiatrist that she remembered seeing a dark, evolving shape come out from behind one of them—and that is where her memories ended for some time. She was found in a field a mile away three weeks later, with strange gray bruises all over her arms but otherwise unhurt. Upon waking in the hospital, she was from that point on terrified of small rooms and seeing anything moving in the sky above her.

Depression led her to chronic poverty, homelessness, vagrancy, arrests for petty theft and assault. From age sixteen to twenty-four, she was in and out of support groups for those who believed they had been abducted by aliens. She spent her twenty-fifth year in a psychological care facility after setting fire to several buildings at a lumberyard. She claimed she had retreated there because the aliens were coming back for her and had ringed the property, unseen, trapping her there. Upon her release she worked at a car wash and then, in May of 2009, she responded to an ad to go hiking along the Strongbone Road.

She had never held a job for more than eight months, being prone to conflicts with her co-workers, and two men had filed restraining orders against her since 2004. Among her possessions after the hike ended was found a trove of thirty sketches she had made over the years, of the moment when that dark shape had appeared before her at the carnival. She had also spent countless hours clumsily sketching vast open plains with featureless white skies. In the opinion of one psychiatrist, this was the geography in which Emma felt safest, able to run from danger in all directions.

GAIL GREENLOVE

The very worst stories I've heard, or been a part of ... it seems like there were three or four tragic factors somehow coming together at once. It's not one person, or one or two factors converging; it's more than that. A mix of the wrong personalities and situations. And when you look back at the events years later, you're stunned at the chances of so many scary elements converging, so many coincidences.

MICHAEL

I would say it was maybe noon of the next day that I began to really worry about the Peter thing. No sign of him, and I felt like we had no one watching out for us. Not that he was supposed to even be doing that, but that was the feeling I got. None of us were saying anything, of course, and we were getting further and further away from each other, so I'd go two or three hours easy without seeing Shannon or Emma. And I wasn't even keeping track of the miles or the time at that point, I was just dragging myself along. My mind couldn't get settled, there was no peaceful aspect to the walking, just this mental novacaine sensation. The weather was exactly the same as the first day, it was just more empty steps.

My energy didn't last very long. I decided to crawl into my tent and sleep a bit and then maybe walk through the night. I figured that would be a good way to catch up to Peter, hopefully. We didn't have to talk or anything; I just wanted to see him, make sure he hadn't abandoned us.

(Out on the road.)

I woke up at a little before dusk. It was raining very very lightly, and I sat up fast, because I saw a shadow above my tent, it was real close, like right outside the tent, and as soon as I sat up, it moved away fast, and I heard footsteps. But for some reason, I was afraid to even peer out the flap to see who that had been. It made no sense at all. I just sat there until my heart stopped pounding. What was I afraid of? And when I did look out, there was no one out there. The sky was gray, no sun again that day, and it was getting dark. I was getting paranoid and not like myself at all. That fear made no sense whatsoever. But it felt real.

NARRATOR

Nadia Oliver is a professor of chemistry at the University of Lethbridge.

NADIA OLIVER

I think what happened would have made sense if you consider what you really had, which was a group of people suddenly on very low rations, getting physically weaker with each passing day... and walking in a place none of them knew, where the sense of progress was removed because of the landscape ... plus no communication between them at all, or with the outside world ... if, when all that was established, the Yawny plant were to be ingested toward the height of potency, the warm weather, ingested by weakened and dehydrated people ... then the effects would likely have been very powerful.

GAIL GREENLOVE

The problem is that the toxicology reports just didn't show it. They just didn't. Not one of those people had any Yawny in their system when they were found, and it couldn't possibly have gotten out of their systems so quickly.

So you're left with an impossible scenario. You're left with more than a few instances of behavior and memories that don't add up together.

MICHAEL

I wasn't even considering it. That just wasn't something I was into, that kind of stuff had always scared me. I'd seen a bad trip once, a guy who kept shouting that he had to save everyone, he had to save everyone, and he was running down these train tracks, almost got killed. So ... on day two, no, I had no intention of biting into that stuff. How would I even know what part of the plant had any effect?

(Out on the Strongbone Road.)

But you see how they skitter and move, the strands. This was the only motion we saw, maybe a bird once in a while, but this stuff was like ... a secondhand presence, it was like I wasn't walking alone, I could hear it if I concentrated, skittering across the asphalt, but I may have been imagining it. Anyway ... I got a little obsessed, I started trying not to step on it, so every hundred yards or so I would deviate, or take a big step over it. And if I stepped on it accidentally, I would think Oh God, it touched me, it touched me. And when it got dark and I kept walking, I was afraid, because I couldn't see it anymore. I knew it was there but I couldn't see it. That was the worst. So maybe I'd begun to break down already, just two days in.

(Back indoors.)

Shannon and I walked together for a bit, she made an effort to catch up to me, and she smiled, as she would do ... and that made it a lot better, but she stopped a couple of hours after it got dark, and I was alone again. I knew it couldn't have been Shannon outside my tent before; she just wouldn't have been like that.

I went off the road about five times somehow, even though it was perfectly straight, it was just so dark. And I thought, where are the sounds of animals? Where's the wind? At one point I realized there was just dust beneath my feet, and I was actually lost. I'd lost the road and never even noticed it. And I panicked and made myself stop and sit and maybe wait for Emma

to come along. And she did; like a half hour later I heard one of the pumps being operated nearby. It turned out I was only twenty feet off the road. But I didn't join her. I waited until she was gone, she never saw me, I don't think. Then I kept going. It was probably almost four in the morning when I just couldn't go any further. Didn't even put up my tent, I just wanted to pass out.

There was something so wrong here. I hadn't been able to identify two things which were different from hour to hour, and I couldn't identify two conscious thoughts I'd had. I literally did not remember what I had even been thinking about. If you asked me as I lay there in my tent how long it felt like I had walked that day, I would have said, well, frankly, maybe five miles. Or maybe five hundred. I do not remember.

NARRATOR

When he was eleven years old, Peter Ricks invited a friend from his elementary school on a camping trip to Banff National Park. Three years before, his family had walked from Canmore to Castle Junction, nineteen miles through the woods, and the journey had made quite an impression on Peter, and he had asked to do it again each summer since then. Peter's friend was named Chad Kern. His parents said it was okay to go, and the Ricks family drove to Canmore on August 27. A single night of camping at a popular hiker's shelter was planned for that night. Vaughn and Allison Ricks shared a tent, and Peter and Chad each pitched their own right beside each other, less than twenty yards away.

When Peter's mother and father found that Chad was not in his tent come breakfast time, they became immediately worried. Peter himself seemed slightly dazed and uncommunicative, as if lost in a dream he couldn't wake up from. He finally told them that he had seen Chad go off in the middle of the night down the trail, daring Peter to follow, but he had been afraid to. He had waited in the tent for Chad to return. But a lot of time seemed to go by, and he hadn't known what to do. He had finally fallen asleep. A panicked search was launched, with other hikers camping at the shelter being the first to rush down the trail in search of the boy.

He was found at the bottom of a gorge two miles away, having fallen to his death.

Peter Ricks, long a withdrawn and fearful child, withdrew into a shell of guilt and shame from which he would never truly emerge. However, he remained a capable if friendless student, and functioned well enough to graduate from high school, then a trade school. He lived alone for many years, working in electronics repair, and seemed to be very slowly putting the tragic incident behind him. But then something happened in late spring of 2008 which changed his life powerfully for the worse.

MICHAEL

I was walking in sort of a daze. I didn't feel rested at all, and sometime around midday Emma came up beside me. She looked fairly pale and sick, and she began to talk to me right away, that was the end of the silence. She didn't think anything of it, it was like she *had* to start talking, she couldn't hold it in. I didn't even feel strong enough to tell her to stop, it felt like anything that happened to me wasn't worth struggling against, you know, I was so weak and the road just kept going, so I let her talk. And here it all came, the story of her life, and all her strange stories and paranoia and imagined fears, it all came out in one long, endless stream, she would not stop talking. It was ... aliens are living in the woods and they look like tree stumps, but no one can see them except her, it was ... there are people she knows who

glimpsed Satan in the sky and had their minds destroyed and they're living in asylums in Greece ... she had all these details about everything that didn't make sense, and after an hour of this I stopped hearing her, she was making things so much worse. She was like a cavity rotting a tooth out, and I couldn't shake her, but I didn't want to in a way, anything was better than being alone.

I didn't say more than ten words in response to her all that time. She'd filled her head over the years with such awfulness, her image of the world was so dark. Everything was a trap and a conspiracy. And I listened to that for hours, felt like.

Somewhere in there she was moving way ahead, she had gone off to look for Shannon. She had to find Shannon, she said. I remember that the pattern I was talking about, that yellow and black alternating pattern, like an old TV that couldn't keep its vertical hold, came back and filled my mind as I walked. When the pain in my feet got bad enough I lay down on the road thinking, If I just lie here and close my eyes, maybe the landscape will change. And when I opened my eyes and saw that it was exactly the same, and that after almost three days it felt like I had gotten no closer to where I was going, I began to cry a little.

GAIL GREENLOVE

It's never added up somehow, that the psychology of these people should crumble so quickly if they didn't take any of the Yawny plant. So the thinking for a while was that the toxicology tests themselves were flawed. Myself, I think there was another factor, which was Emma Bailey. There are poisonous people, people who *are* the virus; they don't carry it, they *are* it.

MICHAEL

Sleeping there in my tent that night, having no idea where the others were, I was wondering if I'd be able to get out of my tent the next day. My feet were covered in blisters, I was really weak, but I had no appetite, the thought of eating my food made me ill. I considered just not moving. I was near a water pump so I could just rest for a full day, and in another two someone would have gotten to the end of the road, and at some point they'd come back for me. That was my logic. Very off-kilter. I think the next morning was the last time of lucid thought. My memory gets so unreliable after that, as if the act of going to sleep and waking up, a little before dawn, as if that act somehow drove me mad. No plant caused that. No one person caused that.

NARRATOR

On June 7, 2008, eleven months before the walk on Strongbone Road, Peter Ricks signed up for a Saturday bus trip at his church, a day jaunt to the centermost portion of Banff National Park, forty-two miles away. The destination, Bow River, was just one mile from the gorge where his childhood friend Chad had fallen to his death. The daytrippers, about thirty of them, had lunch by the river, and in the afternoon there was a hike into the gorge. It is believed that no one in the group that day knew of Peter's connection with the place.

Ronald Garr was a church counselor who had sometimes gone hiking with Peter.

RONALD GARR

He was a smart guy, but he wasn't always aware of obvious things, you know. He truly didn't know the geography of the area well enough to know at first where he was actually going; he just signed up because he signed up for anything in the outdoors. I was probably one of the

very few people who knew what the story was, and I remember asking him, 'Hey, are you going to be okay with this?' Because he'd never been back, of course. And he said he thought he'd be fine. He had walked a lot of places in the last thirty years, and they were all the same. On the outside, he was certainly OK. I didn't know exactly where that little boy had died, and he didn't give any indication of seeing it.

NARRATOR

The hike did in fact go directly past the spot where Chad Kern had fallen.

Some members of the church were surprised when, about a month after the hike into the gorge, Peter came to services with his hair a much darker color than usual. He dyed it again later that year.

RONALD GARR

The hair, I never said anything about, I don't think. But I asked him about the t-shirt, definitely, because I saw him wear it three times in a row, something like that. He wasn't coming to services much anymore; he was always sporadic, but when he did, he was in that same t-shirt. He said he'd just found it at a yard sale, some offhand explanation.

NARRATOR

Comparing Peter Ricks' signature on a driver's license renewal form from 2009, and on his tax return, it is drastically different from years before.

GAIL GREENLOVE

What he was doing, obviously, was writing with his left hand a lot. Chad Kern had been left-handed. It was another one of the strange little gestures he'd been making since the accidental trip to the gorge. If you hold up the one photograph that was taken on that family trip ... hold that up to a sketch of what Michael Spinell said he looked like when he met him in Goodlow, you'd probably get this impression of a sick joke, a man imitating the memory of this little boy who had vanished and fallen and died—the dyed hair, the same t-shirt design he had been wearing when they'd found him, with Kool Aid Man on it—not exact, mind you, but a close reproduction. And then trying to adopt the ways of a left-handed person. Without a word to anyone ever about why he was doing this. You wonder how far this would have gone. You have to wonder what it was like to be in this person's mind, if it was guilt leading him to this, and what happened to make that guilt so intense that it suddenly took him over, so many years after the initial incident.

All we know is that his walks got longer and longer, but he didn't like to go alone. He wanted to walk for miles and miles, but he never wanted to do it alone. Which to me is so very sad. Maybe total strangers were a good option because who was going to ask him about this past, or what his hair used to look like?

MICHAEL *(out on the road)*

This is where they tell me I left my tent. Just got up on day four and started moving, left it behind, still pitched—so that tells you what I was like.

(Inside again.)

From the time I started walking, I felt like I was outside of my body somehow. The walking suddenly got easier, it felt like I was being pulled along by a thread I couldn't see, some momentum, something that wanted me to keep going. Right down the center of the road, I think. I remember humming a lot, the same song over and over, that 'Time in a Bottle' song. And the impression I got of the landscape wasn't that it was just an empty plain; even the colors seemed gone now and it was just a black line ahead of me separating two white skies, not one sky: one high and one low. That impression would last for a long time, then the reality of the road would come back, then it would fade again.

It started to get dark, and I had never stopped once, I'm fairly sure of that for some reason. But I was walking incredibly slowly. And around the time the sun went down, there was Emma up ahead again ... and she and Shannon were fighting, they were fighting in the road. Shannon had rolled on top of Emma, and they were scratching and clawing at each other, and I got in there and broke it up and Shannon ran off, crying, holding her shoulder.

I don't know where Emma went to.

GAIL GREENLOVE

Shannon Francis was the only one who kept any sort of record, fragmented as it was. It's tough to call it a journal, but it was from that we learned Emma had followed her too, just like she'd followed Michael Spinell, telling her stories, hounding her for hours, until apparently there was an incident between them, which we suppose Mr. Spinell witnessed.

MICHAEL

Night came, and I guess we were only another day's walk from the end of the road, but it could have been three years for all I knew. I was still moving ... and out of the dark, almost floating out of it, came Peter, coming in the other direction. So I guess this was the impossible vision; because of where they found his pack, it couldn't have possibly been him, they say, it was all a delusion, but it felt real. He walked past me and I stopped him, I said, *We have to all get back together or we're going to die out here, there is no end to this road, we were all lied to*, but he didn't answer me, he looked right through me. And he kept going, and I was too weak to follow him. I can still feel the cold sweat on his arm, he was covered in sweat.

I had this dream sometime the next day, I don't know where I was when it came, I must have just walked in the morning until I collapsed from the pain in my feet. I only covered eleven miles that last day total if you measure from the place where the tent was to where I finally wound up, but the dream came before the end, so maybe halfway there. There was a woman on the road, way up ahead, and she was waiting. She was wearing black—not a dress, but the kind of clothes that someone who works in a kitchen wears. And I knew that she was a baker. I couldn't say why; she never spoke, she wasn't holding anything, but I knew this is what she was. I know she wanted me to keep going. She was going to give me something if I walked far enough, but I didn't know what. I was going to have to look for it though. It was going to be in a cool, dark place. Which I wanted so badly to hear at that point, because it had gotten so hot. I couldn't drink water fast enough.

GAIL GREENLOVE

In the interviews afterward, we would ask him, 'You keep using the word *baker*, but what gave you that impression exactly?' And he could never tell us specifics. Or how these thoughts were communicated to him, because it wasn't through speech. Eventually you just have to set aside that line of questioning.

MICHAEL

All I could think of was this cool dark place ... and I was happy again. I had a reason to keep walking. I'd left my food back in the tent so I was mad with hunger, but now I had a reason to care.

NARRATOR

Shannon Francis's record of the walk, written on a small spiral notepad, consisted of just three sporadic entries. The first two were straight documents of the journey thus far, impressions of the setting, and an inventory of her supplies. In the last one, she wrote only the following:

A very good morning because there are no wolves, and no buttons, and no bad people. The baker has promised me good things to eat up ahead. Yum yum.

That were the last words she wrote on her notepad. Like the others, she left no record of any attempted outgoing cellphone calls.

*'A single twisted trunk of tree,
branchless and dead, is the solitary witness
of my passing.
I try to see myself
as it must: a wasted, creeping figure
bent forward by wind,
finding footing
where the road allows,
a wavering blur,
a dream of a figure.
I try to see, try to know what it knows of this place.
But all I can see is lightning,
a cruel spine of mountain,
and all I can hear is the screaming.'*

- Michael Spinnell, December, 2015

MICHAEL

All day, I alternated between very brief periods of semi-lucidity where I knew where I was, and that I was moving forward toward the end of the road, and periods where I had no conception of much of anything. The sound of my shoes on the asphalt was so loud in my ears, so loud, and the Yawny plant seemed to be growing and growing around me. I would look behind me and the roots would be in motion, stretching toward me. And the one thing I would have thought was a hallucination turned out to be real, which was that the road had started to break apart, splitting this way and that.

I must have had a little bit of sanity left in me, because when I saw the crack, I think I knew what it was on some level, right away. It went all the way across the road and several dozen yards beyond it, to the right. It was about a hundred feet wide. It was such a gaping dark thing that had done so much damage to the ground around it, and created such a deep pit—a pit so

deep I could see it was lethal from a football field away—that I just stopped where I was, in awe.

NARRATOR

The sinkhole may have formed anytime in the previous two weeks. It cut off the road entirely just nine miles from its endpoint. The soluble bedrock of the plain in that area made it especially susceptible to cover-collapse sinkholes. Water erosion set in motion by some of the wettest winters on record had created an expanding hole beneath the surface, with asphalt and sediment remaining barely stable over the top of it. Eventually the cover could not support its own weight, and had suddenly given way.

MICHAEL

I started walking toward it. I was totally indifferent to how dangerous it was, because this was the place, this is where she wanted me to go, the baker. I was going to get something nice, but I had to go down into it.

About half of it had created a sheer drop of about fifteen or twenty feet into nothing, but the other half was more tiered, you could ease yourself down on ridges and shelves that had formed when the crack happened. The earth was black down there. The sun was out and the shadows made it impossible to see anything more than five feet deep. I sat down on the edge of the asphalt and let my legs dangle over and lowered myself down until I had some footing, and I let go, and immediately the ground gave way and I fell, I fell on my back and I flung my hands out to grab anything but I descended and hit some hard surface. There was this tremendous pain all the way up into my teeth and I was in the dark, looking up at the sky.

(The ambient sounds of the Strongbone Road in the present day rise.)

I saw someone down there, and her face was so strange that there was no recognition in me. This was no one I knew. She was on her back, and her legs were up and hooked over a jagged block of asphalt that had caved in, like this, you know, so it was like she was stretching out her back, therapeutically. Her arms were even stretched out on either side of her, all the way out, the left arm and the right arm, like this, and her palms were up. But she was staring upward. Her eyes were open and she wasn't blinking. And there was lots of blood beneath her nose.

And it came to me that it was Shannon. I crawled over to her, I couldn't feel my right foot at all so I couldn't stand, it would have been too painful anyway. Her eyes looked like they'd been replaced by fake ones, they looked like marbles almost, and she wasn't breathing. She had this expression on her face of ... wonder, I'd call it. Like she couldn't believe this had happened to her. She was dead.

I was there with her for a while, but not because I felt anything for her. My mind was not capable of empathy just then. I stayed where I was because I thought I could hear whispering somewhere and I was trying to trace it. A woman, whispering to me, and I thought it was the baker. She wanted to tell me where to crawl, but she had to be really quiet for some reason.

Finally I crawled off and into the dark, where it was nice and cool. The sunlight above me disappeared because I was crawling underneath a long section of asphalt, like I was creeping into a coffin. But the ground had opened up beneath it. I could see a slope ahead of me, about ten feet ahead, and a tiny ray of sunlight coming through the ground above me and shining down on it, like one of those pinhole cameras, you know. And suddenly a face appeared out of

the dark, right into that little bit of light, it almost jumped out. I could almost have touched the face if I had reached my arm all the way out.

It was Emma. She was flat on her stomach like a spider, she still had her backpack on, and then she slid right down the slope and out of sight, without a single sound. She disappeared in the blink of an eye, and I was just alone there in the darkness.

TRUCK DRIVER

(as he drives down the highway)

It was probably no later than mid-September, because that was typically when I'd stop driving for Chase Colney, the road would be shut down in October for the weather. But I'd just done a forty-eight, which is what we called a shift where you're just going back and forth for two days straight before you got two days off; they eventually stopped that. And toward the end of a forty-eight—and I was definitely not the only one who had done this—I would have to pep myself up somehow. And I'd found that if I had just a little Yawny, it was like a really good caffeine shot. This time, it was right in the middle of the day, and I was forty, forty-five minutes away from Fort Nelson, and I took a little, chewed it up, you could just put the little rings into your mouth. I just wanted to get a little focus back. And only about ten minutes later, here comes on the side of the road ... the sight of, get this, someone sitting at an empty table, like a card table, by the side of the road. Now there is absolutely no one supposed to be on this road, and there never was, *anyone* on this road. So I see this and I immediately slow down, hit the brakes, looking at this the whole time in the rearview mirror. Holy hell, I think, what in the world am I looking at? This woman must be crazy. Because it was a woman, she was wearing what they call chef's blacks, I used to work in a diner. It was cold that day too, very cold. I didn't know why, or how, but I could see from a hundred yards away, looking back, that she was just sitting there kind of smiling, as if to say 'Come to my table and buy something, I have some good stuff for you on your trip.' But it was empty.

And I was about to get out of the cab and this feeling comes over me so strong ... and it was that if I went toward that table, this woman was going to kill me. Just outright kill me. And I drove right on. I didn't want to know. And I didn't feel better until I was all the way in Fort Nelson. Now that, I attribute one hundred percent to the Yawny plant. That's the weird kind of vision you could have out of nowhere—something with no meaning at all, just plain strange. Because she wasn't there on the return run, not at all.

MICHAEL

There's a book called *Lord of the Flies*, and I've never forgotten the end of it, when the authorities show up and it snaps everyone in one second back to reality after a completely insane situation, and it was a little like that. When they were putting me into the ambulance I felt like I was myself again, even through the pain, and they tell me I had tears pouring down my face, and I was asking where Peter was, *Where's Peter, Where's Peter?*

NARRATOR

Michael Spinell had crawled out of the sinkhole and walked to the end of the road under his own power—despite the fact that he had two broken bones in his back, and was so disoriented that he went for a full mile completely in the wrong direction. It was only because a surveyor had come out to the abandoned weigh station at Muskwa that he was spotted.

Shannon Francis and Emma Bailey had both died from their falls inside the sinkhole. Emma's body was found, with Michael Spinell's guidance, in a niche fifty-five feet beneath the Strongbone Road.

Peter Ricks' backpack was found sixty-one miles from the starting point of the walk, and an empty water bottle belonging to him was discovered almost a mile away to the west of the road. But despite an exhaustive search of the area, he himself was never found. It was thought that he could well have walked into the mountains to the west, or simply been picked up on one of the highways that were accessible by foot.

What he had sought through his walk on the Strongbone Road was a mystery, as was the reason he may have lost his mind.

Toxicology tests found no traces of Yawny plant inside the systems of any of the discovered hikers.

RONALD GARR

I'm like most people; I just do not get where he could have gone to. He would have eventually come across either the highway or a water source, and that's your survival right there. So he walked past those and then ... I mean, there's no logical answer. But then, why was he out there to begin with?

GAIL GREENLOVE

I was in my office, it was fall of 2012, and a call was transferred to me from Mr. Garr, and he said he had a question for me. He said he knew I wouldn't be allowed to comment on an ongoing investigation, even one that's been cold for years, but he said one question had been absolutely haunting him, so I told him I'd try to answer it. He said, 'Was that sinkhole really, thoroughly searched, every inch of it?'

And I told him that yes, of course it was. And he thanked me and hung up.

MICHAEL

(out on the Strongbone Road, for the last time)

They said, Oh, they must have stumbled into the sinkhole, maybe in the dark, and maybe they were together, maybe they were alone ... they don't know. But I'll always think there was something out here. Waiting for us, waiting for people like us. And you could stand out here on this road, like we are now, day in and day out, recording me ... and it will never show itself. That is what I think about.

GAIL GREENLOVE

Signs were put up on the old access road by the fall, and they've been there since then, and there's no more northern access to the road anyway, so we really don't get many people, even curiosity seekers, out that way. It just never developed into a problem. Nobody should have ever wanted to hike that road. I've convinced the only reason you would go out there and put yourself through such a place was if you wanted to go inside yourself somehow. I mean, all the way down. I think that incident was all it took to make it even less attractive, if that's possible. You can see that the road is crumbling more and more every year. In another twenty, there'll be not much sign of it.

NARRATOR

What's left of the Strongbone Road has been relatively undisturbed since 2009. There have been no distress calls, no reports of other hikers attempting to walk it. The sinkhole was never filled by authorities, but the winds and snows of the harsher seasons that had followed slowly changed the landscape. Only two years after its spontaneous creation, the sinkhole was no longer recognizable as such. The earth there was merely soft, uneven and unstable, and the asphalt was completely broken, with huge pieces of it missing, swallowed whole and then forgotten by the indifferent, orphaned landscape.

Poetry by Mia LeBemay

tarp

My name is Jack Shell. This is the story of two hills, really. I grew up in rural Mattoon, Kansas. My family's farmhouse was on top of one small hill, and across the way, a little higher, were the Renkos. Between the properties was a long depression where a creek had once been a hundred years ago, but it was dry and only about ten feet wide when I was a kid.

The Renkos were considered bad seeds. Their property was derelict, always about to be taken by the bank. They survived who knows how, buying and selling and trading things, government programs. You never knew which relatives were living there. I grew up looking at their house on the hill, only occasionally seeing someone up there. Over the years they had more and more junk strewn around. They didn't like for anyone to see them. My family had no contact with them. We didn't know anyone who really did.

One day in 1933, one of the elder Renkos, I think his name was Peter, trudged up the hill on horseback with another horse tied behind him. That one was weighed down by an enormous piece of folded tarp, a new acquisition, apparently. I watched the Renkos' hired hand, a strange man called Tibb, drag it off and work to drape it over an old tractor. The tarp was black, must have been twenty yards long by ten wide, and from the time I was seven to when I was nine it covered that tractor. Most of the time you could just see its flat tires underneath.

The tarp always bothered me. See, when night came and the wind kicked up, I could kind of hear it if I had my window open, rippling, resisting ... and looking out my bedroom window to the west, I saw it bulge all over as the gusts got under it, like a pulsating monster trying to rip itself out of the ground. That sound was repellent but hypnotic to me, and I would open my window and look up the hill to see if the tarp would maybe escape its moorings. I'd lie on my bed sometimes and listen real hard, and there was that sound, like tiny claps of thunder

contained in a small space. The tarp could look like some terrifying dark animal trying to beat its wings and take flight. One time in a rainstorm I thought it resembled a ghost striking furiously at what lay underneath it, pounding that decrepit rusting tractor with its arms again and again, trying to kill it, smother it.

I didn't like the tarp. I remember a cold, cloudy winter day when I was walking home from school and a corner of it had folded back somehow, exposing a rear section of the tractor, like it was inviting me to come look, come get closer. I think what scared me most about it was that it just never went away. Spring, summer, winter, fall, it was always there up the hill.

When I was ten I woke up one morning to see that the tarp had been moved in the middle of the night. Now it was covering the Renkos' well, which I guessed was no longer working. I supposed it must have been Tibb who did it, rotund and disheveled Tibb who must have been living on bread and water for what the Renkos probably paid him to do his manual labor.

Once after a snowfall, it was weird, I looked out toward dusk, and I saw Tibb with his heavy beard and old clothes lying on his back and slowly letting himself slide down the Renkos' hill that way, as if he were a kid like me. He wrapped his arms around himself and slid down toward the gully that separated their property from ours, a slow and bumpy descent. When he reached the bottom, he just lay there in the snow, staring up at the sky with his arms positioned like a person does when they're in their coffin, up over the heart. The only way I knew Tibb had ever gotten up again was by a set of footprints I saw in the snow the next day, headed back up the hill.

In August of 1937, the police came out to the Renkos' house. My sister and I watched as two cars pulled up, and an ambulance. People gathered around that well and remained there most of the day, and a truck with a winch showed up, and another car with two men in suits. Doron Renko, a man in his eighties who'd been living there for a few years, had fallen down the well. The word was that he had been senile, and maybe sleepwalking, and he'd wandered too close to it. But our Uncle David, who worked for the county detention center and knew people, told us that the old man had had to peel the tarp back to get underneath into the hole, so he must have been really deluded about what he was doing.

Then, after my sister was safe asleep in her room, Uncle David told me something else. *Don't tell your Dad I told you*, he said. There had been long claw marks on the tarp, and little bits of fingernail from where the old man had tried to grab on to stop himself from falling. Claw marks and little rips three feet long, Uncle David said.

But life went on up at the Renkos' property. In autumn I watched Tibb cement the well over. I had been playing near the gully, throwing a ball up in the air and catching it under a cold gray sky, and I watched him drag the tarp away toward their old barn. When he emerged from it, he saw me, and he raised a hand to me and smiled a strange smile, revealing a mouth missing half its teeth. I turned away and went back in the house.

That night I went to the window and looked out. The tarp was half inside the barn, half out. It looked like the tongue of some ... what's the word ... leviathan, a tongue lolling out of a large, blocky head. It was two months like that, and there were times I thought it had crept out more fully into the daylight, just a foot or two, or retreated a little further back into the shadows, to fool me.

I was twelve when the Renkos won a car in a contest sponsored by Chrysler. Here it came, towed up to the property, a brand new Imperial, gold seal engine, dual carburation. The town talked about it in wonder. But the Renkos, of whom there only seemed to be four left now, and who were all older, neither used that thing nor sold it. It sat in the dooryard, neglected. A year after it was won, Tibb took the tarp, faded now because of being left out so long in the elements, and dragged it over the car, concealing it from view. No one could really figure out why they were leaving their prize to rot, but it was said they had no skill with or understanding of money, and no offers were entertained for it from the one or two people who bothered to visit. Some thought the Renkos just wanted everyone to see it on the hill, to know they owned it, in order to earn a little respect, and that made sense in a way.

By the age of fourteen I shouldn't have been scared of the tarp anymore. And I wasn't, mostly. But the wind and the rain still seemed to animate it in odd ways, and it cloaked that car so totally, with nothing visible underneath, that it seemed like it had eaten the car and was trying to digest it. I remember three black birds landing on it once and standing there, looking in the direction of my bedroom at sunset. And waking up past midnight on Christmas Eve, overly excited for the morning to come, and looking out and seeing Tibb, getting fatter and more hunched over every year, placing heavy rocks on the four corners of the tarp to keep it more firmly pressed against the ground. That time my sister came into the room, and we watched him together. She was frail and troubled, and thought Tibb was a ghost. *He's not a ghost*, I told her, but she'd thought that as long as I could recall.

On Sunday, February 2, 1942, I awoke to the sight of snow falling outside my window. Four inches had settled overnight. It was just past dawn, and the world was cloaked in pale blue and gray. On the hill across the way, there were several cars parked in the Renkos' dooryard, and a bunch of people milling about. There was also a hearse from Grovinger's.

Most of the activity was centered around the Chrysler. The tarp had been pulled back and all the doors opened. I saw flashlights and the pop of flashbulbs. Then I heard my father bang out our front door and saw him appear at the back of our house, beginning to trudge through the falling snow down our hill. It would be a slow hard slog across the gully and up to the Renkos', cinching his winter coat tight around him. Within an hour the tarp had been removed from the car entirely, and it was strung up to cover the open face of the dilapidated sorghum barn. That way, the car could be pushed inside and gone through out of sight, and heaters set up to keep everyone warm for a few hours as they worked.

More people showed up throughout the morning, though my sister and I were forbidden after a while to watch. Tibb had already confessed by then to his crimes, been taken away forever. The old Renkos, Gorman and Anka, a brother and sister in their sixties, plus their aunt and uncle, in their eighties, were all inside the car, two in the front seat, two in the back, stabbed to death, about twenty times each. But it hadn't happened the night before, no. No. Those bodies were horribly decomposed and had been for a long time. Two years, they said. For two years I had seen that tarp covering the car day after day, going to school and coming home from it, and late at night and early in the morning, and for two years the family had been in there, lengthwise on the driver's seat and back seat, concealed, rotting while Tibb went about the business of collecting their checks and tending to what needed to be tended to. It was the milkman who had tipped off the authorities, who'd found Tibb's fractured explanations of the Renkos' absence more and more bizarre over the past few months.

If we had that big piece of black stuff, my friend Scottie had said the summer before as we had eaten egg sandwiches at the bottom of the hill, *I bet we could put it over my fence and it would be like Briggs Stadium, we should take it!* But I knew Scottie was trouble, so I had reminded him the Renkos were strange and maybe dangerous.

The murders seemed to cause a permanent change in my sister for the worse, as her imagination ran ever more wild and sleep began to elude her, as it would for the rest of her life. But while others talked endlessly of the bodies and the crime, I watched the tarp, simply left behind after there was nothing more to see, unnecessary as evidence because the police already had a full confession. Hanging there for the first time stretched out to its full size, fastened firmly against the sides of the barn. Now the wind seeped into the cracks between the wood and the tarp and caused it to ripple softly and silently, like the ripples in Evry Creek, murmuring to itself. I tried not to look. I walked the long way to school so I wouldn't have to skirt the property. I played on the other side of the house or down the road with the Bengtsson kids.

My father died two years later, and my sister and I inherited the farm. We learned that there was more money than we suspected, and my uncle advised us to buy the two adjacent properties from the county, one of which was the Renkos', which had been left to wither and die by the tax authorities, who apparently never received a fair price for it. So that is what we did. We bought the Feltons' three acres and the Renkos' tract from the bank. And that is how what lay up the hill remained exactly how it was: the tiny house, the pig pen, the barely arable plot, and the barn. There were only two kinds of people who had come onto the property since the murders: property assessors and very occasional strangers whose appearance up there was brief and unexplained. My uncle told me they were likely drawn to the place because they wanted to see where it had happened. They likely had hopes to see the Chrysler, but that had long since been sold off for a debt, or perhaps destroyed.

Days upon days, trying to keep the farm going at age eighteen, with my unreliable uncle off in Topeka and my sister sometimes up at the Haberman Home of Rest, sometimes home when she was better. So few people believed me when I told them I never once went up the hill in all that time. Never. There was no reason to. The house would be demolished when warm weather came, so there was no need to tend to it. The Renkos' property had nothing to offer us. It was merely a bargaining chip, but we wouldn't sell until things got a little better in Mattoon.

August 14, 1945. I had driven into town and gotten a little drunk with Embry Klassen. The storm came right about last call. We went out and looked at the clouds flowing fast across the sky and we stood and watched the pouring rain, and decided I should stay a while at his house before heading back home, maybe it would let up. He didn't have a radio in his Dodge so we never knew how bad it supposed to get. We wound up staying up all night, fastening things down around his house, because the wind was vicious. Then I told him I had to try to make it home before Wallace Road washed out entirely. It was almost 5:30 a.m. when I pulled in and shut off the engine and nearly fell asleep right there at the wheel in the pre-dawn dark. I could barely see out the window, the deluge was so heavy.

Getting out of the car and running up to the house, I sensed something was wrong. I'll never know how or why that feeling came, but going inside I was overcome by a feeling of dread, as if I were walking into a crime scene. The first thing I did was go to my sister's room. She wasn't in her bed and the covers were pulled back. I called out to her, searched all over the house.

Downstairs on a little table my mother had made long, long ago, my sister had left a note. This is what it said:

*I know he's not a ghost
But I want to make sure he doesn't come back anyway.*

The prints from my wet fingers washed out her words as soon as I'd read them.

I went to the window and looked across our property, toward the top of the hill. The little structures the Renkos had left behind were huddled in the dark.

I took no flashlight with me when I set out, and no umbrella. I didn't care about getting drenched. The wind had picked up even worse, and sometimes as I made my way down the hill I had to tuck my head down and stop for a second. My feet were soaked in less than thirty seconds. It had gotten just light enough to see them beneath me. I kept wiping the rain out of my eyes.

Twice I slipped and went down, both times near the gully when I had to move sideways to keep my balance. It was filling up with rain. It was halfway up my boots when I waded across, and the current was strong enough to make me reach out for the branch of a tiny struggling tree for balance, almost pulling it out of the ground with my clumsy weight.

When I made it to the other side, it was the first time I had touched the Renkos' property since I was nine years old and had crept up the hill on a dare from Meredith Pounds. Rain flowed down it now in thin runnels about twenty feet apart. I stood straight and took a deep breath. As soon as I did, the wind hit me full force and I sunk to my knees to avoid being pushed backward into the gully. The tree I had grasped for balance snapped in half and the current carried its thin skeleton away. I saw a piece of balsa wood tumbling end over end several yards in front of me. I began to climb. My next look at the sky told me we were still in for the worst of it. Around a single gray patch of persistent dawn light was coiled a loop of black that had begun to swirl ever so slightly. I knew tornadoes and I knew that somewhere close would be hit. Maybe not us. Maybe.

With my head down I saw a green slipper nearby. Before I could reach out to touch it, the wind picked it up and pushed it further away, carrying it sideways across the hill, toward Kemshaw Road. My sister's, no doubt.

It was light enough to see the barn clearly, and the house. I staggered forward and felt something scrape my neck. Another piece of rotting wood loosed from the property had blown past me.

Then I was in the muddy dooryard. The place where the death car had been parked was just to my right. To my left, the barn.

The tarp remained fastened stoutly across its open face even after all this time, but it wouldn't last in that wind. It pounded it, assaulted it.

The corner at the bottom right had been undone by someone, and now that piece flapped and danced, dipping first into the barn and then blown out of it, over and over again. That's where I went.

When I got to where the barn's mouth was open to anyone disturbed enough to enter, I stopped and picked up my sister's other slipper, and this I put into my pocket. My ears had become clogged with rainwater; I was hearing almost nothing now but a steady thrum, like I was in a tunnel.

I had to get in there without touching the tarp. I couldn't touch it, I would die if I did. I stood there timing the wind, waiting until it blew the corner in, when I would have just seconds to enter before it danced again. I ducked my head at the right moment and I stepped in quickly. I'm not sure I ever found out exactly what my sister had used to hang herself. I didn't see much but a silhouette; it was so dark in there. It was so dark in there, it was so dark in there.

I timed the wind and ran out again. The tarp strained and tried to wrench free but it couldn't. I began to descend the hill. Twice as many runnels of rainwater now. I didn't bother angling my body sideways because I didn't care if I fell down.

The water in the gully was up to my knees as I went back across. My right foot slipped and I fell into it, swallowing some. My clothes were pasted tight to my body. I stepped right out of my boots, leaving them behind.

The wind sounded like a train. It was coming from behind me and I decided to crawl rather than be knocked over. I heard another tree snapping somewhere. Tiny bits of mud blew into my eyes, striking them like BBs.

There were two tremendous sharp cracks and I looked behind me. Up the hill, the barn was collapsing. The foundation had given in and it came down in two great sections. It took only three or four seconds to crash to the ground, and with the quick fading of the echo its decades-long history vanished.

I got up and stood there like a deaf mute, my senses numbed, not wanting to go any farther. But the wind pushed me on.

Our car was just up ahead finally. A ferocious gust almost picked me up from behind and I had to turn my body in the direction of the Renkos' to stabilize.

The tarp had torn completely free of the ruined barn. The wind had swept under it and now it was turning end over end, tumbling down the hill, spreading out, stretching out, a hungry raven with broken wings. It was carried down, down toward the gully, where it would certainly get caught in the stream ... but no, the wind picked it up once again and blew it straight across. It thumped and twisted and rolled, now climbing our hill, coming towards me. I remained in place, making no further move toward the car.

Here the tarp came, pushed off its path and back onto it again, gaining speed, floating as much as five feet off the ground then crashing back onto it before the next upswell flung it toward me again. At the end, a second before it struck me, I cried out. Then everything went dark as it enveloped me, knocking me backwards off my feet, cloaking me entirely. I tumbled end over

end inside that wet stinking void, legs bound, arms trapped, screaming. I smelled blood and rot and death. The tarp clutched my skull, strangled me, swallowed my hands.

And then it let me go, blown onward, missing the car by no more than a foot, tumbling toward the back of the house and the road beyond. I rose, took two more steps, and fell onto the grass one last time, where I remained, unconscious, for more than an hour, a victim of a bad concussion.

When I awoke, the rain was still falling, but the wind had all but ceased. The tarp was gone, blown Christ knows where, down what roads, into what ravines to become someone else's silent phantom. *What a horrible, terrible dream*, I thought, but no, in the distance where a barn should be was a heap of boards and splinters, and my sister was still dead beneath it, and the last meaningful chapter in the story of the Renkos' lonely tract of land had been written.

1947. I am visiting Parrish-Valliere Cemetery. I am finalizing funeral preparations for my Uncle David. He is to be laid to rest between my father and my sister. I walk alone to the gravesite. The grave has been freshly dug for the funeral the next day.

I see that the whole thing has been lined with a large piece of old black tarp. I summon up the nerve to get closer. I am looking for something. Yes, yes: Near one of its edges, I see long drag marks and tiny tears left behind by an old man's fingernails.

elements

My name is Robert Lord. This is a bad breakup story—everyone's got one, right? I first saw Fiona standing silhouetted against a hospital window, a midline I.V. in her right arm. I couldn't even really see her face in that first passing glimpse. I think now how curious it was that I felt the compulsion to stop at her door for a longer look, and to offer a few simple words. She was not my patient. Our conversation was natural and she was flirtatious from the beginning, completely comfortable with me seeing her with no makeup, her long blonde hair in unwashed tangles, the profusion of tattoos on her body jarring so greatly with that cheap pale blue gown. We talked about her miraculous survival of the fate that had come for her on the 12th of June. We couldn't talk long; I had a lot of consulting to do that day in radiology.

She was released four days later and we began to see each other right away, she still hobbling on crutches. At two in the morning on our first night together away, at a bed and breakfast in Cobden, she told me in some detail about the unusual activities that occupied her at night, and had since she was a teenager. She could have lied to me for months if she'd really tried, I

suppose, explaining away her strange hours and secretive outings with friends I never met. But she chose to partially let me in.

Why didn't I run then, when she revealed her perplexing interests? You know why. It was because of the all-consuming fog of physical and emotional infatuation, the yearning to chase an unexpected adventure into something completely divergent. It was because of the way eroticism erodes what is logical and redefines what we believe we need from moment to moment. In a way I was secretly thrilled that Fiona was so bizarre. After a lifetime of playing it so safe, I had been set free into some dizzying maze. Get good grades, go to school, become a doctor, yes mom and dad, come back from California to Illinois to practice and be close to your brothers and sisters, yes, yes, I will ... I will.

Fiona broke all of that. She was beautiful entropy in the last years I felt I had to reach out for it. At forty-four, I had begun to fear I would never experience the rush of making reckless decisions whose consequences were unknowable. I was excited to tell my few friends about her. *Really, she believes what? Are you kidding? What do they do, when they get together? Do they ever hurt anyone?* I'm not sure about any of it, I would say. Fiona filled my head with talk of enlightened ancient religions and elaborated on new age concepts I could barely grasp, but it was all foreign to me in the same way my ex-wife's love for mathematics had been. I described Fiona to others in as much detail as I had been allowed by her to stitch together, and then I would swipe through my phone to bring up her photograph to complete the biography, that photograph of her posing seductively at the Sarah Brightman concert just so.

But my craving for her was about more than that. Her mind was always in exploration mode, hungry to know the meaning and origin of every new word she heard, fascinated by old buildings and dying towns. Her wit was sometimes extremely dark and her judgments of others were quick and decisive and often cruel. She refused to talk about politics or current affairs, and I soon began to see that human beings were necessary obstacles to her ideal life among animals and plants and perhaps one other soul who could accept her for what she described herself to be. Life had not been an easy journey, not since she was twelve and had fled from her adoptive parents.

She would turn forty-two that autumn, decades of territory for our conversations to cover, a whole lifetime to explore. Sometimes the details didn't seem to jibe with others; sometimes names seemed to change and chronologies were inconsistent. As a freelance graphic designer, she had called seven cities home in the last nine years. If I ever felt the urge to question her more deeply about what I suspected were white lies, the urges were usually buried in anticipation of the next intense kiss, or the next gaze at, and touch of, all the unusual art inked into her skin over time, or the next compelling insight on the uglier side of human psychology. She perceived a slow-growing but tidal evil embedded in humankind which she knew in her heart made peace on Earth impossible, apocalypse a certainty.

One night five weeks into our relationship, I woke up in my house in De Soto and she wasn't there beside me. I assumed she'd gone off somewhere as usual without saying goodbye, uncontainable even in the night's deadest hours, gone out in pursuit of her eccentric and mystifying way. But she was downstairs, in the living room. Someone who'd been inside the elementary school gymnasium the afternoon a historically violent storm had struck the town of Sparta on June 12 had just posted the video they'd taken there. Only eight locals had sought safety in that hastily organized shelter that day, but then the winds had shifted in a way that defied natural logic, and at the moment a tornado bore down on the building, a dozen more

people were running toward it only to cower in their tracks when they realized what was happening.

Fiona was watching the video on my big screen TV, in the dark, at no point realizing I was even there. She was entranced.

The video is still out there to this day. It's forty-nine seconds long, a single unsteady, wandering shot taken from a cellphone. It sounds like some kind of enormous industrial machine has wrapped itself around the building, a machine that thrums and threatens, creating distortion in the phone's tiny microphone. You hear a man hollering at his wife to press herself against a wall. In the semi-darkness a basketball hoop is shaking, and one violent quiver of the camera lens catches sight of a small broken window high up near the ceiling. Through it, curls of wind have invaded the gym. Two banners commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the school's founding are billowing on the ceiling.

And then, a thin woman with blonde hair is seen running toward the tall doors that separate the people inside the building from the shrieking havoc that has come for this small town in southwestern Illinois. Fiona flings her body against the horizontal metal bar which will release her as if she knows it will take all her weight to get out. An old man screams at her to stop. The door opens only halfway and then the wind invades, tries to batter it back. That wind is so loud that all the foreground noise is simply swallowed in a terrible exhalation of an unseen monster's breath. What can be glimpsed of the outdoors is a blur of gray boiled in a torrent of motion, and Fiona runs into it, her hair wrapping itself around her face. The woman operating the cellphone camera runs frantically in the opposite direction then, losing sight of everything, but not before Fiona is seen at the edge of the frame throwing her arms up instinctively to protect her eyes as she stumbles forward into an abyss few have ever escaped from.

When the video ended that night in my living room, she just sat there as another vacuous trifle depicting disaster and panic cued up on some anonymous user's playlist. She'd suffered six broken bones and a concussion, but the deep cut into the medial patellar of her left leg had been the true emergency; she'd lost a stunning amount of blood. They'd choppered her to Carbondale after finding her in a church parking lot a mile from the school.

That moment when she couldn't seem to drag her eyes from the screen to perceive my presence was when I first felt logical considerations return to me, and I saw her for what she might be: a mechanism of ruination that could never be settled by someone with my docile temperament.

Why did you run into it? I asked her. *You never told me that. Were you really in Sparta that day to talk to a design client?*

She finally confessed to a few untruths. To the question of whether there was something she had felt or sensed that day that told her to go to that place of all places, at that particular time, she was evasive. The important thing, she tried to explain, was that she had gotten what she wanted from the encounter, had seized it before it could slip away from her. It was *not* suicide; she said.

She asked me to hold her. That became something much more, as if she were trying to smother that ugly moment by creating a memory of exhausting intimacy. She got me to promise I would wait a while to make her tell me more about the incident. I did stay with her, all along preparing myself for the difficult conversation I knew was likely ahead. I was going to fail, that much was

clear. It was only a matter of time before the safe and comforting handcuffs of my daily reality drew me back from Fiona and the mystery of her desires. That was the prudent, prosaic way I'd always lived.

Then came those five days in August. I was used to her temporary disappearances—one, two, and even three days without any sort of contact—but this time, on day four, I couldn't take it anymore. Late on a Sunday night I drove downtown to her tawdry little walkup over a crafts store and climbed a dreary stairwell where someone had graffitied the words SCREW DEMOCRACY in orange letters eight inches high. When there was no answer to my knocks at Fiona's door, I decided with a mix of worry and anger that I was getting in there somehow. I told myself I was concerned for her safety, that she could be missing or in danger, but I truly think I'd simply reached the end of my frustration with her secrecy. The old credit card trick worked just fine on her cheap lock.

I had only visited her here twice. The place was dark and cramped, and she confined the entirety of her actual living space to the main room, where a futon had become her permanent bed. No TV, just books upon books and a laptop tucked away somewhere so she could work.

Immediately I was gifted with an unusual stroke of luck. In the kitchen, a sheet of paper with handwritten travel directions to some unidentified place about twenty miles away was fastened to the refrigerator. They had no context whatsoever, and no addresses listed, but I took a photograph of them all the same because of a date written below them: August 14, with a question mark. That was four days before.

What was supposed to be the bedroom had been emptied out and made into a place where she stored the things she didn't care to talk about. I'd never actually been in there before. A lamp sitting on the floor had been left on in there, providing a somber glow.

I should have left then. There was somehow more a sense of trespassing looking at all the uncanny objects she kept than even if I had read her diary. To an outsider, none of them made sense. A dozen or more jars sat along the top of a bookshelf, each one marked with a sticker bearing a unique two-letter code, written by hand. ZN. EK. LL. PV. There was a thin liquid in each, of a pinkish color that varied in intensity from jar to jar. A number of old audiocassettes were jumbled in a small novelty picnic basket on the windowsill, and a battery-operated tape player rested on the floor beneath it. The labels on the cassettes bore hastily scrawled phrases: STARFISH FARM 1, STARFISH FARM 2, STARFISH FARM 3, and so on. Uncomfortable with the silence, I knelt to put one of the cassettes into the player and started it, continuing my exploration as tape hiss filled the room. The recording began with the faint sound of dozens of footsteps belonging to many people filing into some unknown room with a creaky wooden floor. Chairs were moved around and taken as people settled wordlessly.

Laying on a card table behind me was a gold sword, almost four feet in length, vintage, caked in rust, valuable maybe. There was a thick, vivid, muddy handprint on the handle. I touched my index finger to that substance, which inexplicably was very, very cold.

Paranoid, I turned to the doorway, looked out into the other room. Someone had to have been in here recently. On the cassette tape, a woman had begun to speak in French to her audience in that small room at something called Starfish Farm.

I stepped into the tiny bathroom to run some water over my finger. The overhead bulb had burned out. The archaic tap in there spat out a burst of loud air before delivering a weak stream. I dried my hand on a towel, and when I looked back into the sink, the substance I'd washed off my fingers had left a curious stain there, an almost perfect gray. In the bedroom, the woman speaking French had, for some reason, become angry and her words were sharp and urgent, creating an echo.

Before I left the bathroom, something caught my eye in the mirror over the sink. The shower curtain had been drawn back from the tub, and there was a large black zipper bag in it, taking up almost its entirety.

I knelt to look at it, pressing a hand down onto its center. Something was definitely inside, a broken accumulation of material that stretched about five feet. I pressed my hand down more firmly and moved it slowly toward one end. A light bundle of petrified wood, is what I first thought.

I felt something vaguely round and hard beneath the zipper's tongue. I pushed my index finger into some kind of small circular indentation. And I immediately thought it could only be one thing, which was an eye socket.

I left the bathroom in one swift motion, revolted, and stopped the tape as the French woman's voice rose in either defiance or accusation, and she began to laugh in a cynical way, and others in the room laughed with her. I rewound the tape, put it back in the basket, and left the apartment.

After about two hours of sleep I dragged myself into the hospital before dawn to prepare for a lecture on venipuncture I had to give at ten, leaving the rest of the day free to drive where the instructions I'd found in the apartment indicated. Having no idea who to call about Fiona, I had no other useful inspiration.

I had an unexpected guest in my office, one who had just walked right in, knowing I would be there at some point that morning. She had been prepared to wait as long as it took to greet me.

Fiona sat in the visitor's chair across from my desk. She wore an oversized brown sweater and sweatpants, having no jacket despite the daybreak chill outside. She looked pale and hungry. There was no embrace of reunion, no wry smile for me. She didn't even stand up. She was a shell of herself.

I didn't know what to say when I sat down on the other side of the desk from her. I really just wanted to know if she was all right, because she certainly didn't look it. It was hard to believe this was the same woman who'd walked with me two weeks before beside Cedar Lake, wearing a dark blue sundress, tilting her face to the sun.

She was afraid to tell me where she'd been. Only that it was what she called another necessary step in a sequence. Toward *what*, I asked. That was when she spoke the word 'transformation' for the first time. Not 'enlightenment' or 'education.' Transformation, a very, very different word. She was back for a while now, and she hoped to have her energy back in a few days, at which time she would be able to say more. She refused my assertive offer of even a cursory physical examination.

I confessed to breaking into her apartment, which she seemed to care not at all about. And I told her flat out that this was not the life for me, not one I felt comfortable with anymore, that we were way too different to make a way with each other.

How do I describe the burning silence that followed my clumsy little speech. For a moment it was as if she hadn't heard me at all. And then on her face grew an expression that had no precedent in either our brief relationship or in my life. Her head tilted like a dog's that was confused by its keeper's wishes and her eyes went utterly dead, then widened, a precursor to physical attack. I felt the hair on my arms tingle, and my breathing actually stopped for a second.

Do you know how far I've walked? she said. *Do you want to see my feet?*

I apologized, told her I needed to focus on my work, and that it was best if we didn't contact each other anymore.

Fiona rose very slowly from her chair. She took one step toward my desk. *One day I'll walk on a carpet of the dead*, she whispered. She seemed to tower above me. My hands gripped the arms of my chair hard.

Fiona's eyes began to roll backward in their sockets. Just as I began to stand to help her, that horrible sight corrected itself and passed so quickly that I almost could have imagined it, and she stared at me as before, ruthless but pitying somehow, a superior creature only briefly thrown by a puny one. I was terrified of her then. But she turned and moved very slowly out of the office like an etherized patient.

She did not look back. I remember her turning right, which would have led into the corridor directing people toward radiology, and the chapel.

I got up, closed my door, and for the first time ever, locked it. When my receptionist came in a half hour later, I instructed her not to let anyone in to see me that day without first calling my desk to confirm it. A few minutes later I noticed that Fiona had left some dirt on the floor both entering and leaving. In fact, I thought but could not prove that I'd seen a small clump of it fall from her hair as she spoke.

Driven half-mad by curiosity, I drove twenty-one miles south after my lecture, following the directions I'd photographed in Fiona's apartment. The handwriting that had made them was distinctly feminine, but not Fiona's own. Their level of detail clearly did not come from some cursory search of the internet.

I found myself entering Trail of Tears State Forest and parking in one of its many sequestered lots. *Find Cherry Road, and take the Blue Heron Trail to the south, past the duck pond*, the directions said. I had stopped to buy bottled water, because Blue Heron trail wound through the woods for miles toward Brown Barrens Nature Preserve.

Halfway through my solitary hike, after passing only about a dozen other people, I veered off the trail, just as I should have. I tramped through modest underbrush for fifteen minutes, slowly gaining elevation and spotting a giant rock formation shaped like a U which served as another

key landmark. I had come to feel isolated and uneasy, feeling that no resolution to these directions could make any sense.

Finally, up ahead I saw a rocky area beside a dry creek bed, apparently the last step on the list. I had been led to the middle of nowhere.

It was well beyond the creek bed that I found a grassless patch where there had been excavated a crude ditch about six feet long and four feet deep. Some of the dirt that had been removed to create it lay in small piles on the ditch's edge, great chunks of cool wet earth. But most of it remained in the ditch, loose and broken.

If it was a grave I was looking at, it created one very odd impression: that its occupant had, sometime in the last few days most likely, dragged themselves out of it from one end.

After returning to the hospital for some bleary-eyed consultations I slogged home at eleven at night, mentally exhausted even more than physically. As I went around turning on lights and making myself a sandwich, I developed a persistently paranoid feeling. I thought about my large empty basement and how it sat in darkness night after night, so many places to hide. I thought about the spare bedroom and how I hadn't opened the door and looked inside it for at least a week. How long I had lived alone and not given a moment's consideration to how easily accessible the back yard was from the woods.

When there was a knock on my front door, I almost knocked over my glass of iced tea. It was 11:31. I approached the door as quietly as I could and peered through the peephole. There was a woman with dark gray hair out there, her hands folded neatly in front of her. Something about the way she was dressed, mostly in black, told me I needed to speak to her.

She introduced herself as Greta Fair, and informed me she had 'practiced' with Fiona for twelve years. There was no apology for the late hour. She had to tell me something, she said, quietly and calmly. The right side of her head was shaved and the silver pendant which hung from her neck described the shape of a hawk. Like anyone else Fiona had ever associated with, I'd never actually met her before. Her eyes seemed very small, very dark. She looked to be about sixty.

Fiona had given her my address a week after she'd started seeing me, Greta explained when I asked how she'd come to have it. Fiona had done this for her own protection.

Greta had no designs to engage in small talk, and I ended even the possibility by asking her what Fiona was trying to do, if she were slowly trying to kill herself. That would probably be the result, I was told, but it was not Fiona's intention.

I wanted to know about the forest next. My suspicions about what lay out there were quickly confirmed. Fiona had coerced Greta into assisting her in her own burial, though the nature of this coercion was not revealed. Fiona had lain alive and virtually motionless in that grave for eighty-two hours before Greta had returned at a pre-arranged time to pull her out, driving her directly to a hospital in Jonesboro for an aborted treatment for pneumonia and dehydration.

You have to go somewhere far away, Greta told me when I took too long to think of another line of questioning. *You have to separate yourself from her very, very delicately*. Fiona, she explained, was becoming too powerful.

She'd been holding a book in one hand all along and I had never even noticed it. Now she held it out to me. Thin, dark brown, its cover and spine unmarked. I was instructed to take it, protect it from harm, and neither show nor mention it to anyone else until she returned for it. She claimed this was all she could say to me.

I explained in some detail what had happened that morning with Fiona, that I'd told her we were through and that I doubted I'd ever see her again. When I was done, she shook her head very slowly.

This is the worst possible thing you could have done, she said softly, as if she were in awe of how stupid I'd been. Did I know Fiona had been abused? And that there had been a pattern of it for three decades?

I assured her I did know that. But did I know how she had dealt with some of her abusers? Did I know that the forces she had bound herself to in the spring in order to start down this path wouldn't have allowed her to do it unless it she'd already laid it with some of them?

It's her anger, Greta said, that created her desire to transform. Even if she were to win all her gambles and become something beyond biology, she would never rise above jealousy, rage, revenge. People like me, Fiona called us the takers and the abandoners. *You've made her weak all her life*, Greta said coldly.

This was insane. I hadn't done *anything*. I fell for someone. I *fell*. We use that word for a reason. But in Greta's mind, if I had tried to tell Fiona it was over, the only hope I had to escape this situation was if she miscalculated the next risk she took. She'd taken two, and now had only two more to go.

Frustrated, I impotently held the book back out to her, telling her I didn't want to read some text to explain what was going on. I wanted *her* to explain things. But before I even got this thought out of my mouth, Greta's eyes shifted over my left shoulder and into the house and she cut me off.

She's here right now, Greta said under her breath. It was half statement and half question, as if a powerful but unreliable sixth sense had overcome her. Clearly she was very afraid.

I turned and looked back through the shadowy living room, where I had just turned all the lights out in preparation for bed. The air in the house felt different, even more possessed by an unseen presence than when I had walked in an hour before. But I didn't know how much of that was stress and an ever more riled imagination. I took a few steps toward the room, peering beyond it into the kitchen, where the refrigerator in that moment cycled on again, humming faintly.

I heard Greta move, and I turned. I stepped through the doorway out onto the front step. She was walking down my driveway toward the quiet road, fading into darkness as she moved beyond the security floodlight's reach. Somehow she'd gotten out here without a car, unless she'd parked it far away. I stopped myself from calling out to her, and just let her go.

After a thorough exploration of the house to ease my mind, and several minutes spent observing the shadow-dense edge of my back lawn from an upper window, convinced I had seen something move out there on the border of the woods, I sat down at the kitchen table with Greta's book. It was quite old and rough-textured; the binding was barely hanging together. I opened to the title page. There were only three large words printed there, in a language I was completely unfamiliar with. Two of the letters weren't even recognizable as anything I'd ever seen. I turned the tanned pages carefully, estimating the book's age to be seventy-five, one hundred years. The writing within was in that same language, speckled occasionally with more unusual letters, rendered in a serif font that reminded me of old newspapers. The more I looked at the text, unjustified and ragged, the more I became convinced I was looking at English, but in a kind of code. Nothing in the front or the back of the book hinted at any kind of key I might use to decipher it. But I soon believed Greta felt the pictures would tell the story.

There were twelve drawings in all, spread throughout, all done in black ink, quite skilled. Most of them depicted gatherings of women. One showed several of them dressed in flowing robes, moving through some sort of low dark tunnel lit by torches they carried. Another showed a beach at night, with three women standing at the tideline, facing the ocean. There was a burning ship on the horizon, some sort of war galley by the looks of it. Another drawing showed an enormous but almost entirely featureless house on an empty plain beneath a completely black sky, and in each window was a feminine face in an unlit room, though none of the women had mouths. They all gazed off the page with sunken eyes.

Toward the end of the book came the pictures I felt I most understood. They were of a different artistic style, unrelated to the others, and in these there was always just one woman depicted.

She was bald, and unclothed. Her face was never clearly shown. Here she was in an open field, distorted and stretched to suggest her bowing in the face of a violent onrush of wind. Long pen slashes depicted downed trees laying all around her, and tall grasses were being pulled toward the bottom of the page by the gale. The gray sky above her roiled with ambiguous shapes.

Two pages after that, she was gazing up from the bottom of a deep, deep cave, a tiny circle of sky high above her, through which the stars could be seen. The interior of the cave was contoured with jagged rocks and barbed arches, and she was compacted into it, leaving no room on either side of her to even move.

After that, she was hanging upside down by a long length of rope which stretched up and out of frame, her feet and arms bound. She was underwater, and in the background some sort of giant shadowy two-tailed monster was lurking, swimming toward her.

This sequence of drawings, if that's indeed what it was, ended with the woman lying in a desert. Again, it was night. But there was almost nothing left of her. Her body was blackened, her face finally exposed but rendered as only an indistinct mass. Yet her left arm was raised toward the stars in some inscrutable gesture of defiance. Around her crouched wolves, staring obediently at her with pinprick eyes that glowed from the light of a burning wooden post from which, I assumed, she'd just been set free. Or perhaps *gnawed* free.

Below each of these four sketches was printed a single word, finally in a recognizable language now, French. Even from my limited memory of studying the language in college, I could

determine these were the words for each of the four natural elements that comprised our world: Air. Earth. Water. Fire.

Ten pages from the back cover had been etched an image I could only bear to look at for five seconds, no more, and then that awful book absolutely had to be closed for good. It showed a midnight plain identical to the one where that strange house had been drawn. But now the house was gone. An enormous human figure was walking from over the horizon, toward the reader's eye. Small trees and a distant road meant to show scale had the effect of making the figure seem a hundred feet tall. Her hands were claws, her arms muscular. Long ragged hair curtained her face. On that face was an expression of such malevolence, it felt like it would emerge from the page to kill me if I looked too long. The giant's eyes were milky, her corneas misshapen and dripping from the corners with some black substance. The ground beneath her feet was strewn in all directions with tiny human bodies, every one of them crushed, the level of detail ghastly. Legs, arms, and heads had been separated from bodies, so many of them that the earth itself could not be seen.

Instead of a single word, the French caption below this last drawing was comprised of a full sentence. With some work and some conjecture, I was able to translate it online:

The wagerer, if able to taste victory over death four times, will be granted the promised transformation ... and she will become unnameable.

September 13. It had been three weeks since I'd seen or heard from Fiona. An email from an airline had reminded me of a vacation I'd set up long in advance, a vacation designed to please Fiona, to bring her memories of a beach trip she'd been invited on once with a childhood playmate before those years had suddenly become frightening for her. She'd been excited to go. I was depressed and lonely. I decided to go on the trip myself, to seclude myself on Cape Cod among autumn scenery and slow sunsets. I boarded a plane to Boston and landed at 9 p.m., then drove a rental car to a hotel in Falmouth.

I walked the next morning to the ten a.m. ferry to Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, planning to spend the day walking slowly to Chilmark, as I'd done a few times before. The sky was muddy with storm clouds and I was worried that the trip would be cancelled and I'd have to drive to the bigger boat in Woods Hole, but the woman in the ticket window said they'd gotten no formal indication of a real problem.

We set out on the half hour ride in choppy waters and gusty winds, and more than a few of the hundred or so passengers looked queasy. I sat on the lower deck and tried to read a collection of travelogues as the boat thumped and struggled with the waves.

About fifteen minutes in, the captain made an announcement that regretfully, we would have to turn back. He'd just been radioed that a front was moving quickly towards Nantucket Sound, and it would be too dangerous to go on. Groans of irritation and disappointment throughout the boat. The snack bar was quickly shut down and the two college kids working it turned their attentions instead to urging people to find a seat wherever they could, as the wide turn in the direction of the mainland would briefly rock the ferry even more.

I was sitting next to two Indian children who had cajoled their humorless father into filling their hands with snacks from the moment we'd set out. Now they were pointing over the side of the boat at the sky and the little girl needed to be soothed. I looked in that direction.

Yes, rather alarming thunderheads had rolled in and the wind had picked up noticeably. I was sitting near a railing and would be unable there to evade an oncoming downpour, so I moved quickly to the stanchion nearest the snack bar to stand and brace myself. Three other pairs of hands were already on it. The boat began a long, jagged curl which, according to a man struggling to stand near me, revealed a disturbing lack of skill on the part of whoever was at the wheel. I made eye contact with an elderly woman in a green scarf that flowed down to her knees. She had one hand to her head as if she were warding off a migraine, and she stared hard and cold at the floor while her husband glanced around nervously.

The rain came. While there was still plenty of standing room along the sides of the wide stairwell that led to the top deck, I went there, positioning myself on the bottom step and holding onto the stout railing as people above began to file down very carefully, crowding the lower deck.

The jostling of the boat was worse than expected. Drinks were spilled, children were grabbed and pulled back to their fretting mothers. A young guy with a huge backpack and a long beard went pre-emptively down on one knee, expecting worse to come. Water came over the railing for the first time, coating the deck with foaming droplets as the last of the more adventurous passengers retreated from the edges of the boat. It began to rise and fall upon the waves in a way I hadn't experienced since going on a drunken charter once in Florida, gaining a disturbing amount of elevation with each swell.

Now the captain's messages over the P.A. were both constant and unintelligible, dwarfed by distressed conversation, the battering of the waves, and the groaning of the engine. I offered a limp smile to a little girl looking quizzically around as her grandfather zipped up her pink windbreaker. Someone bumped my shoulder hard coming down the stairs and I looked up toward the top deck, surprised that not everyone had come down already.

I recognized a face up there, framed by the gray, darkening daylight. It was Fiona's. She was looking directly at me.

It couldn't be; she could not be here. But it took only a split second's conscious thought to realize that it certainly *was* possible. Passengers filed past her in a hurry, many of them getting soaked. The rain slanted in and struck Fiona's back and the side of her face, speckling her blouse. Her eyes were fixed on mine.

I began to move up the stairs with difficulty, maneuvering between bodies coming fast in the other direction, losing sight of her briefly. A man struggling to put on a cheap plastic parka even as he came down got careless with his arms and struck me in the neck painfully. He apologized dismissively and kept moving, and when I regained my balance, Fiona wasn't there anymore.

By the time I'd reached the top of the stairs, lights had come on all over the boat and the wind was whipping over the railings. There came a sound I had never heard before, a wet hissing as swirling layers of spray rising off the waves surrounded the boat, and it became difficult to keep my eyes open.

A man in an eyepatch blocked my way, seizing me by the shoulders, yelling me to go back down, and then he slipped on the deck, falling hard. I looked around me, at all the empty rows of orange plastic seats, and saw Fiona sitting alone, facing away from me now, facing the front of the boat. Looking out over the water, I couldn't see land and I couldn't see the sound; it was all undefinable. I was soaking wet in an instant. The man in the eyepatch was struggling to get up and I helped him. A woman screamed down below. There was the bleating of a horn that went on and on, swallowed bit by bit by the hissing of the attacking spray.

Then the boat, which had finally managed to set a proper course back toward Falmouth, rose once again and suddenly shook violently. I found myself tumbling down the steps, a bolt of pain shooting through my hip, grabbing hold of the railing before I could descend almost halfway. I heard a thunderous cracking sound followed by a dog yelping, and the entire world began to tilt. I remember getting both hands on the railing and seeing my legs dangling in the air. I held on for as long as I could, but my hands the rail were too slippery, and I fell.

They would tell me later that only ninety seconds passed between that moment and the one when two dozen passengers went into the sound, which means that much of the imagery that skittered and danced through my mind as I lay unconscious in the hospital afterwards was of my own tortured invention—there was simply too much of it to have ever truly happened.

I remember seeing a folded wheelchair fly by me and over a railing, striking it so hard one of the wheels came off. I remember a door opening and a man tumbling out of it and seeing a toilet tank behind him; he'd been cowering inside the men's room, grasping the doorknob, and gravity had flung him out. I saw dozens of silver quarters sliding and bouncing down the lower deck when the angle of the boat stopped making sense. I saw a man running with a lifejacket in each hand, his path cut short when he collided with a bike rack he had no idea was there because the lights had suddenly gone out again and everything had gotten unnaturally dark. Where there had been daylight, there was instead a wall of black water, its surface scarred by rotating eddies of mist.

And then, I was submerged. Down into the water after me came a child with dark skin. I saw his small hand clutching a bag of Skittles before he was swept away. The upper half of my body twisted and spun and I felt my right shoe yanked off my foot. I was sucked into a dark funnel, arms pulled high, and all sound suddenly stopped. I was twisting and spiralling downwards, unaware of my own name. I was nothing but a bare ounce of fading consciousness.

Then I felt fingers around my throat, squeezing, and my eyes came open. Fiona's face was in front of mine in the frigid deep, her eyes large, her mouth open in a scream not of anger but of primal, naked terror.

That was when an immense, shapeless shadow slammed down like a giant fist from above the surface of the water, creating a resounding, ear-splitting echo. The tide which had pulled me down sucked me back upwards again, free of Fiona's death grip, and I tasted freezing air. A wave carried me to an impossible height and at high speed toward the exposed, rusting underside of the ferry. I threw my hands up and outward to save myself, and then the hissing mist enfolded me.

My return to Carbondale and my life at the hospital three and a half weeks later was a quiet one. I was walking again by then, with a limp that was aggravating but manageable, and my right hand would not close all the way, and might not do so for a very long time. I got devastating headaches every four days or so, the lingering effect of a concussion that was very nearly much more than that; in the water I had struck my head hard on an unknown object, which one doctor theorized, based on my fragmented memories, may have been another's skull.

On my first day back, I was taken to lunch by my colleagues and given a get-well card everyone had signed, and was then left blessedly alone. I was unable to stop myself from my daily check of the rapidly forgotten news story of the Oak Bluffs Ferry. Four people had drowned, and everyone else seemed to be accounted for, though that couldn't be determined for certain; no walkup passengers had been asked to show ID to buy a ticket to the crossing. I used what influence I had to search other hospitals on Cape Cod for evidence someone with Fiona's description had been brought in. Even if she gave a fake name, I figured, all her body art would likely jostle a memory or two. But no.

I spent a few quiet nights at home, gritting my teeth through the physical therapy exercises I'd been given, reading medical journals, and mastering my new home security system. On Sunday, October 16, the very last day of this story, I was visited by the police at a little past one-thirty p.m.

They were two very cordial detectives who had enough of a sense of humor to introduce themselves as the two Pats, one man, one woman. They had come to ask me what my relationship had been to Fiona Ruth Plausner, age forty-two, current whereabouts unknown. There had been an incident at her last known address downtown. The two Pats were in my home for a total of an hour, during which time I told them about two-thirds of the truth, fearful of the rabbit hole the whole story might swallow me up in.

Fiona's neighbors had heard three gunshots at about 11:30 p.m. on the 12th. Police had arrived at West College Street to find her apartment door open and the residence itself empty. The sheets on her futon bed had been kicked or pulled off, and two of those gunshots had struck the bed itself, while the third had put a 20-gauge bullet deep into the wall behind it. The window had been wide open, and it was conceivable that if Fiona had been in there, she had gotten out onto the fire escape. Because no one had come forward to express concern for her whereabouts, only a few fruitless calls had been made to some phone numbers that had been found in her apartment. My own number had been called multiple times from a cellphone she'd left behind, but the most recent call had been in August.

There was no mention of, or questioning about, Fiona's beliefs or lifestyle, or any unusual or even damning objects that may have been found in her apartment. I outlined my relationship with her and told them we'd broken up amicably a couple of months before. Yes, I had been to her apartment a couple of times. Nothing unusual about it, and I'd never met her neighbors.

The detectives revealed to me something I'd never known. Fiona had been questioned in the disappearances of two of her past ex-boyfriends, in 2004 and 2009. Austin, Texas and Rochester, New York. No charges had ever been filed. Birth records indicated she had an older sister, who'd vanished in 1980 from a foster home in Robin Song, Virginia.

She had been a little strange, I admitted, and liked to think of herself as a practitioner of this or that unusual fringe theology; it had all been Greek to me, muddled and unimportant to our brief

time together. The detectives never interrupted me, maybe trying to let me reveal too much, and I sensed I was not being given the full picture of what they knew. The female Pat looked at me very closely throughout, and was quick to clarify things I'd been vague about. It began to feel quite intentional on her part.

Eventually, they thanked me and left. I sat for a time on my couch, flipping through the channels on TV, not really seeing any of them, haunted by the thought Fiona may have kept a diary, and that my fingerprints were on that zipper bag I'd seen in her bathtub. When my hands felt steady again and I'd had two cups of strong coffee, I decided to busy myself by finally going through the mountain of mail that had accumulated during my convalescence in Falmouth. I'd only gotten as far as dumping it all into a plastic tote.

Bills, ads, invitations, two small packages from Amazon. And one letter addressed to me, yet having misspelled my last name. The sender had hand-printed a return address: Greta Fair, Starfish Farm, 1014 Trapper Road, Reynoldsville, Illinois.

The letter was postmarked October 10th, two days before someone had entered Fiona's apartment and apparently attempted to kill her.

Robert:

If you're reading this, you haven't run. I'm asking you one more time to go. Probably the only reason you're still alive is that she sees the end of her path so close ahead, she thinks you're beneath her violence.

Everything she ever told you about herself may have been true once, but not for a long time. She broke from us, the people who understood her. We are peaceful but her intent is not.

All things are bending and merging for her now. The Far Spider has shown her favor. It embraces her rage and is rewarding her for it. It's begun to create conditions for her that she can't create herself. The burial was of her own design, and the windstorm was random. But I don't believe the storm over the sound was, and the next thing won't be either.

I have loved her, but it can't be allowed. I tell you this to prepare you for what I have to do. I have sent our sisters away to safety, and I have gone to stop her.

If she does survive it all and is granted transformation for her wagers, leave nothing of your body for her to find. There is even more inside it that she can swallow and feed from.

Reynoldsville was forty miles south, in the same general direction as the place where Fiona had confronted and defeated the cold earth under the impenetrable terms she had entered into with some entity I did not know or understand. It was a little before five p.m. when the GPS told me I was approaching 1014 Trapper Road. The last eight miles or so of the trip, leading me a stone's throw from the Mississippi River, had been an alternating pattern of woods and farms stretched along decaying country tarmac, and I expected the address to be one of those farmhouses, high on a hill maybe, far away from everything.

But then for a full mile, the surroundings got even more dense with woods, no houses at all on either side. Finally I seemed to reach my destination, which was nothing more than a tiny square indentation on which sat a single-story structure that didn't look much like a house at all. I pulled the car into a patch of grass beside it. There was a free-standing brown sign in front of this brick, virtually windowless enclosure, a sign showing great age and even a few old, unenthusiastic loops of yellow graffiti. This place was described in a few lines of cold block text as a former water analysis station run, now shuttered.

Swearing, I checked the address again. 1014 Trapper Road. The numbers were almost comically prominent on the building. A wide unmarked gravel road led back into the woods. I idled where I was for a minute, trying to make sense of the facts I'd been presented. And then I noticed the small green Department of Water Resources logo in the bottom right hand corner of the old brown sign. That logo was a starfish. I decided to head down that gravel road.

It was scarred with unrepaired potholes half-filled with rainwater, and I drove all over the place to avoid them. Despite the autumn chill I was sweating lightly, and an unusually constant din of sirens miles away, a chorus that had begun ten minutes before but had never gotten any closer, made me extremely tense.

Eventually the road opened up into an area of small hills and fields left to grow wild and die. Then up ahead, there was a small sign with a symbol on it indicating the road was ending. Which it did, simply petering out into an area of ragged grass as if the county had given up in mid-construction.

I shut off the engine and got out. It was disturbingly quiet. I walked past the sign and made my way up a gentle rise, hoping to get a slightly better view of the area.

About a hundred yards away from the top of the incline, there was what appeared to be a farm, inaccessible by any real road. The way towards it consisted of nothing more than a path in the grass beaten down by the occasional vehicle. I left my car where it was and walked, still limping.

I counted nine small structures total. Two tiny barns; one long, low building that might have housed animals; and five roughly identical shacks with windows cut into them. There was also what I figured to be an outhouse. No one seemed to be here; there wasn't a single car in sight. But there were two clotheslines with garments hanging on each. Undeniably a sign of life.

There was not a sound, though. None of the shacks quite matched in their design, as if instead of being built at the same time, one had begat another, and then another, and then another. There was a big fenced pen among them, but no livestock inside it. I saw a very large garden that still showed signs of producing beets, lettuce, and broccoli, and beyond that, two fields that had been planted with potatoes but were now suffering.

I stood and listened for a moment, waiting. And then I flinched and almost yelped as a loud alarm suddenly went off in my coat pocket. I tore my phone out of it to silence it with shaking hands; it had erupted in some kind of weather warning or maybe a missing child alert, as it did once every six months or so out of the blue. I didn't even look at it. Those alarms had never affected me; they'd only woken me, terrified, from a deep sleep or shattered my concentration in the office. I shut the phone off instead and settled myself, breathing deeply.

I moved to the shack closest to me and pulled on the rickety door. It was unlocked. Inside was a tiny domicile that seemed to have no source of electricity. The thin bed had had its sheets and blankets removed. There was a small table, a dresser. Flowers in vases, still looking relatively healthy.

It was much the same story in two other shacks. I guessed that someone had been living in them quite recently. They were not very dusty, there was no sense of mold. In the second shack, some books had been left behind, textbooks mostly. Sociology, economics. Also some poetry.

I moved over to that long, low building and went inside. It was nothing but a large empty room with neatly laid wooden planks for a floor, a sort of gathering hall. The acoustics in here would have been very poor, but then, I thought I had heard a sampling of them on a cassette tape not so long ago. About two dozen folding chairs were leaning against one another in one corner. God help me, the first mental connection I made as I stood there was to a photo I'd once seen of the room where Reverend Jim Jones had urged his followers to drink poison.

I detected a smell when I emerged from that building, an unpleasant smell. It got stronger as I moved toward the shack that was closest to the woods, which were about thirty yards away to the west. A sweet but sickly smell.

Call the police right now, I said to myself, and leave this place. The gray sky was starting to lose its light fast. But I was so close. I was so close.

I approached and opened the door. Inside the shack, two candles had burned out; they sat atop a bookcase with nothing in it but a few articles of clothing. The occupant possessed a small desk and chair like the others, and a bed bigger than theirs.

Greta Fair lay on top of this one, face up. The covers beneath her were in disarray. She was wearing faded jeans and a rust-colored sweater. Her feet were bare, her toenails unusually long. Her arms and legs were outstretched.

Protruding from the exact centerpoint of her chest was the golden handle and a full two dozen inches of the rusty antique sword I had seen in Fiona's apartment. Greta had been run through with almost surgical tidyness.

Someone had placed some sort of large object beneath the small of her back so that her midsection was crudely arched. As I moved gently toward her, I bent at the waist to see what it was.

The sword had plunged not only through Greta but through an adult gray hog, and then onward into the bloodstained mattress. The hog's eyes were closed forever; Greta's were open and bulging. The skin on her face had already begun to pull tight against her skull. Blotches of some kind of dark substance had been streaked on her cheeks. There was more of it on the handle of the sword, just like I had seen before.

I stepped out into the light of dusk. I looked to the east, where the once featureless sky had become muddied with unusual patches of color even in the absence of the sun. It looked like a thundercloud had settled just over a faraway part of the forest. But it wasn't a cloud; it was a mass of smoke, breaking apart in wisps and funnels. I returned to the car, not looking behind

me, not taking my eyes off the horizon. The sound of sirens I had heard on the ride to Starfish Farm had returned twofold by the time I got behind the wheel.

It turned out I wouldn't really need the cellphone alert to tell me what was happening and what the source of the danger in the area was. Only about five miles back down Trapper Road did that become obvious from the grim discoloration in the sky and ever-so-faint glimpses of points of light through the trees where there should have been none.

I drove almost aimlessly for a time, not truly understanding where I was, taking wooded country roads in the general direction of Mill Creek. Ten minutes after leaving the farm I started to see isolated but recognizable patches of flame through the darkness.

I rolled down my window and I could just hear it, the sound of fires in the distance, could hear crackling and rumbling even over the car engine and the wind. A turn onto something called Cork Run took me down a gloomy straightaway where I saw, far in the distance, the trunks of trees burning for the first time and a steady orange glow seeping through the foliage. The entirety of the sky ahead of me was slowly turning red.

I slowed the car down to fifteen miles per hour and drove right down the center of the road, hugging the yellow line to keep away from the chaos that was emerging on either side of me. One more mile and I was truly inside the outskirts of the central blaze. Smoke formed a canopy overhead and a million yellow eyes seethed in the underbrush. It was impossible to tell the time of day because the sky had gone the color of blood. The road twisted and wound deeper into the forest, where the fires were growing and growing—a phenomenon statistically less likely to strike Illinois than any other state in the country.

Around a long jagged bend, trees along the shoulder were on fire from trunk to crown, and everything was being swallowed. I felt as if I were travelling through a painting of a disaster, protected inside my expensive car. I kept the windows rolled up now and turned off the vents. The road kept going, and drawn by the certainty that the story was ending here, I followed it. I could feel the heat and figured I could only tolerate another mile or so before it became unendurable. Branches began to fall, sometimes onto the edge of the road so that I had to pay close attention to my path.

One more slight bend and everything got much worse. I saw a big gout of flame off to my right, and the volume of the conflagration rose. The road itself blackened under the weight of that stew of hot colors above. Here the fires had begun to truly rage, and now sparks and small flumes were shooting up and outward over the road.

I stopped where I was, scared to go farther, but transfixed by what I was seeing. Like the sinister attraction of Fiona, this was something I knew I would never experience again, sights and sounds both exotic and supernatural, and I felt myself savoring this last taste of true danger before the life ahead of me, which I knew would have none of it.

Looking in the rearview mirror, I saw that the way behind me remained clear, but probably not for much longer. I looked down just long enough to put the car in reverse. When I raised my head again, Fiona was in the passenger's seat.

She had never looked like this before, never. Her straight blonde hair flowed over a dress of pure white, a color she had never worn in our time together. She was holding flowers in her lap,

carnations. Her makeup had been applied with the kind of perfection she had always scorned in others. The firelight threw shifting shadows across her face, that beautiful face which now looked twenty years younger.

This is not me, she whispered. That's me, up ahead. Go see how close I came. Are you proud of me, darling?

She turned her head slowly, almost robotically, to look through the windshield. I looked there too, seeing nothing but the darkening road and the abstract chaos of the forest fire. And then, the seat beside me was empty again, the vision gone.

I got out of the car, leaving it running. I began to sweat at once and breathing quickly became difficult. I walked forward, feeling uncomfortable heat on the bottoms of my shoes. The noise of the fire was great enough now to drown out my footsteps. Somewhere off to my left I heard a tree fall, and simultaneously, a deep, hollow burst as a tongue of flame arose from a thicket. The shapes of the trees around me were becoming less and less distinct as the glow all around warped their visual integrity.

Up ahead, there was a moving vertical shaft of firelight emerging slowly onto the shoulder of the road between two trees. Fiona, reckless wagerer, lonely murderer, stepped out onto the road. She was entirely engulfed in flame. Only for a brief moment could I discern that she was wearing a long dress, blackened and dissolving fast. She walked gracefully, as if she were walking to me again at midnight along Kinkaid Lake.

There was nothing in her face that was recognizable as human. The flames ate every part of her as she came forward, arms low to her sides, walking up the center of the road through the haze of smoke.

I remember her standing in front of me, and peering into that awful, silent mess of bone and ash, all the flesh gone. Her lower jaw fell open but she could say nothing to me now. I glimpsed the bottom row of her teeth, shining white-hot embers caught between some of them, delineating them in a terrible way.

She remained upright for as long as she could, and then, as I heard another tree split and fall, she fell too at my feet, barely making a sound. Half her body weight had vanished into the air, leaving nothing but a loose pile of remains that burned more slowly now that death had come. Fiona had lost her final bet, tricked perhaps by the uncaring forces she had made her pact with. She came so close, but her only transformation in the end was that of a tortured soul turned to one at rest, a lifeless heart I have, out of pity and nostalgia for an unwise love affair now twenty years gone, secretly preserved inside my beating one.

*Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain*

*Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

- *Matthew Arnold*

The Smoke Child

Dear Mr. Colfax,

I read on a forum about the person that you've been looking for. I think I might know where he's hiding. I think he's in Ruggles Mine, which is in Grafton. It's got tunnels and underground chambers that got closed to the public a few years ago. I don't have pictures of him, but I think I've seen him twice, at night both times. It makes sense that he would try to hide in there.

You need to check it out. I've drawn a map of where I saw him and enclosed it.

Sincerely,

John B. Price

OK, I just want to make sure the slide count is correct here before I start...

All right. Just let me know if the lights are too high and there's not enough contrast on the screen.

Hello, my name is Charles Colfax. Before I tell you my own story, it's very important that I tell you someone else's. This is something that happened in 1921 in Andeston, New Hampshire. Andeston was and still is a farm town, very small. The pastor of Union Protestant Church in Andeston in 1921 was a man named Franz Lairgo, a German immigrant—on the screen now is a picture from the *Andeston Call* announcing his appointment to Union Protestant in 1916.

One day Father Lairgo was visited after Sunday services by a local couple in their fifties, Roy and Rhoda Blass, they owned a carpet store. They had a strange story to tell him. When they were out walking near the southwestern edge of Squam Lake on their property on the morning before in a light snowfall, they had come across a boy of about twelve or thirteen lying on the shore of the lake,

half in and half out of the water, not breathing very well. And he had no clothes on. He was barely responsive. Roy pulled him forcibly out of the creek, and he saw that the boy had a broken left foot. But the immediate problem had been that he might die from hypothermia.

Mr. Blass was sixty-six at the time, but he managed to carry him a half a mile back to their house, stopping and starting, and they got him warmed up, and a medic came to the house with the local GP, who was able to set the foot on the spot and they left the boy in the Blass's care.

Over the next two days, they weren't able to find out anything about who the boy was, or who his parents were. And here we see that particular entry in Father Lairgo's diary, with a translation from German, he kept this diary off and on until he passed away. The Blass's had come to him for some advice on what to do next.

And here we see what Father Lairgo wrote about that, it's just part of his day plan. 'Tomorrow, 10, Blass house. Ask M. for address. Need more information about the boy.' You see the date on this entry is here, November 8, 1921.

On November 9 he drove out to the Blass's property and he met with the couple and they took him upstairs to meet the boy. The night before, the boy had tried to leave, he had tried to hobble out but wasn't able to get very far at all with the broken foot. He was totally unresponsive to whatever language was tried on him: English, German, even a little French. He also seemed very resistant to wearing clothes of any kind; Father Lairgo wrote about his impression that the boy seemed to appreciate being warmed by them, but would only really accept blankets being laid over him.

There's a particular sentence he wrote which is highlighted on this slide. Translated from German, it says 'Something unusual about the bone structure around the eyes. The orbits are shaped differently, a more perfect circular shape than an ordinary person. It bothered me.' And in the margins he made this amateur sketch of those eyes, as if he were trying to remember this detail, and set it down.

Father Lairgo left the couple around noon. It was his recommendation that the Blass's take the child to the social services department in Plymouth the next day.

He noticed they didn't come to Sunday services that weekend, which was a little odd; they were very regular churchgoers, so he dropped a little note in their mailbox that week, but when they didn't come the next week too, he got worried and called, and didn't get an answer. So he went out once again to their property.

These are his notes, his writing about what he saw there. There was no answer when he knocked on the front door, even though the Blass's car was still out front. He walked around the property for a bit, looked into their barn, didn't see anything. So because the front door of the house was open just a few inches, he let himself inside. Up in the boy's room, the bed was unmade. He tapped on what he assumed was the Lairgo's bedroom door, and didn't get a response. Father Lairgo left, and a day later the police got involved.

The Blass's were never seen again. The mysterious boy had disappeared, and it was like he had never touched anything inside or outside of the house. The most shallow areas of Squam Lake within two miles were searched at some point, and of course the woods, but nothing was found.

Not until almost three years later was this rail spike found in the woods by Roy's own nephew, who'd moved into the house. Roy had had about two dozen of these beside his woodpile; he often took things to a scrap yard nearby, and those spikes had remained right where they'd been in 1921. There were traces of his blood on the tip of this one. No fingerprints on the spike at all.

You can go out to the property today in Andeston, this is how it looks now, it's owned by a professional songwriter. Father Lairgo's niece is still alive, and she owns his papers; the only way any of this would have ever been found is that Union Protestant Church where Lairgo started a project in 1970 to collect its archives.

But of course the focus today is on 1988, sixty-years years after the Blass's disappearance. I am a survivor of a certain infamous and tragic incident on June 20th of 1988. This is the first time I'm telling the entire story, so hopefully the technical end will hold up.

I was seventeen years old in June of '88. I had just graduated from Concord High School toward the southern portion of New Hampshire, and a few weeks before the ceremony, my friends and I had started talking about doing some kind of trip, some kind of event to mark the occasion, the transition... ah, but our small little gang, I'll tell you, was not the most rebellious or rowdy, and so our ideas weren't very exotic. I didn't even have a driver's license and only one of us had access to a car, and doing a beach week thing seemed too expensive and too far away, so different ideas were kicked around, but nothing seemed to develop and we started running out of time until I latched onto a notion which I'll describe in just a little bit.

So who were these friends from thirty-five years ago, who are so elemental to the story. Well, like I said, we were the "good" kids, we were the ones who didn't know a lot about sex or drugs or even cutting class, all that just never entered our sphere, we all grew up to think that the law laid down by our elders was just something you lived by.

I would say my best friend back then was this gent, Justin Gary, who had kind of a famous family in the state. His father and his grandfather and *his* father were all prominent attorneys in Concord, and it was expected that Justin would do the same thing with his life, this is something he talked about with me a fair bit. I would say he was maybe the most joyless kid I'd ever known—not the most depressed or underprivileged, the most joyless. Looking back, I can start to perceive more and more how suffocated he had begun to feel about the path his life was taking. He had none of that giddy optimism about what was ahead for us all at college. He was a very funny kid, very dry sense of humor, but it felt like it only came out around me. Big imagination too: Justin and I spent rainy day days coming up with these crazy narratives using only the baseball cards we had. We would imagine entire games played out; the contest was usually to be the one who could describe the craziest play. We also both had similar musical interests, which is sometimes the strongest bond you can have with someone when you're young. He was the one who broke me out of my pop mold a little and turned me onto the folk music of the fifties and sixties.

This is Lena Mitri. She was kind of the pragmatist of the group, great dry sense of humor and terrific with a creative insult, but very studious more so than any of us. She was off to Swarthmore in the fall to study to become an architect, the only one of us headed out of state for college. Her parents and mine went to the same church, the First Church of Christ the Scientist, so we had known each other in that way too, but Lena stopped going when she was about sixteen, and this was where her individualistic streak came through. Totally on her own, she had begun to follow an interfaith movement called Subud. It's not a religion per se but a set of practices, especially a kind of meditation practice designed to show Subud followers their own way toward God. At seventeen, eighteen, that was an unusual and exotic thing to us, her friends; I think we never quite got our heads around it, it seemed to be part of a different Lena that we never explored. Spirituality was maybe above our realm of awareness back then. She was a good sport about our lack of education about it; she would call us the Lost Idiots.

This fellow with the goofy look on his face is Bret Smuckers, and maybe because of his last name he got the disposition he did. Funniest kid on the block by far. Bret approached life like it was a

Marx Brothers movie, and he tended to apply that attitude and that logic to everything. It was Bret's idea that we should all form a comedy troupe after graduation and tour the country with it instead of going to college, a comedy troupe called Fatal Waffle, so for months he wrote material for us and we all went about rehearsing it in our parents' basements: me, Bret, Justin, and Lena. And it was all terrible, I think, and we did eventually give up on that dream much to Bret's chagrin. He could get a little dark, like a lot of funny people, he had a fascination with some dark subjects.

He found schoolwork so ridiculously easy he stopped trying sometime around junior year. He could do all of it effortlessly so it stopped being a challenge, and as a result he slacked off and began to just squeak through with Cs. His parents eventually put a gun to his head and said Listen, you're at least going to NHTI, Concord's Community College, come fall, and so he caved in and enrolled. After our graduation trip he was going to be working at the movie theater near our houses, and so we were all excited to go see free movies.

That was really it, I didn't have many other friends and neither did they, I don't think. We did most things together, a lot of walking around the mall and so forth, normal stuff. We had no social media or cellphones or the internet, we just had a lot of very frivolous and fun group times. We would also all agree to read a book together sometimes and talk about it, funny stuff mostly, *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* or a Tom Robbins novel maybe. All of us nerds off to different colleges come fall.

So we finally developed a strategy for our trip. I summoned up the nerve to ask my father if we could use our family's vacation house on Upper Kimball Pond beside the Merriman Forest. It was a little tricky in my mind because I had never really asked for anything like that before. It was a place my father had inherited from Grampa Mike; not a vacation house per se, it was a little run down and we almost never used it. My parents were never vacation people, this was something that wasn't in their vocabulary. They saw it more as a financial bulwark against tough times someday, so it was kept up just enough to hold off the winter weather. My father paid a real estate company something to maintain it year to year, and so I had been in the house exactly twice my entire life, spent all of one night in it. Here the house is in 1986. I said Um, Dad, would it maybe, possibly be okay if me and Justin and Bret and Lena spend the weekend there?

The big innovation was my idea was to hike there along the Corn Husk Trail, which would drop us only a fifth of a mile away from the house. Here is the map, which was created by the police actually for use at the trial, we'll be coming back to this occasionally.

The plan was, Lena's parents would drive us to the northeastern leg of the trail, six miles from its starting point, and we would walk twelve miles to the house. Now none of us had ever really hiked much before, so the idea of going twelve miles was pretty epic. We had a choice to go about halfway and camp out the big Wonalancet shelter and start off again the next morning, but even that seemed kind of crazy and dangerous to us, so we decided to leave early in the morning on Saturday and walk straight through. The best memory I have of the run-up was going shopping with Bret for our supplies. We overbought crazily, imagining this trek was so immense, twelve miles, my goodness. So much bottled water, which in 1988 was still the kind of item most people just didn't buy, it still represented the height of physical commitment. So much food, probably enough for a week, having no idea how much that stuff would weigh on our backs.

The one hitch in the plan was that Lena's parents did not like at all the fact that she would be alone with three boys, so the stipulation before she could go was that her cousin go with us, and none of us had ever met her, she was a year older, her name was Danielle, even Lena didn't know her very well, she went to Keene State College in Cheshire County, she would be entering her sophomore year. So that was an odd little wrinkle in our group dynamic.

You can see our path, this was not an especially difficult part of the trail; there's the camp spot there that we would *not* be camping at, two miles out from the house. Off we went bright and early, on a kind of glum, overcast day, very hot, piling out of two cars. Me, Lena, Bret, Justin, and Danielle. We got rides from Lena's mother and Justin's father to the parking lot of the Hannaford's supermarket near my house. It was a quarter mile walk down the road to the trailhead.

We were all in a pretty good mood. This was my and Justin's first experience with beef jerky. We stopped and rested a lot. The trail would occasionally brush the river, and there were some nice views. Overall we were very impressed with ourselves for walking that much. It's not an especially tough trail at all, wide and level, though it did have some deep and rough spots that were a little intimidating if you were out there around dusk.

Lena's cousin Danielle was a little intimidating to us three guys as we walked along, I think. She was a very mature and fairly flirtatious person, very opinionated, liked to talk about drinking, she really seemed older than nineteen. I don't think Lena liked her that much, they didn't normally spend a lot of time together. Almost right away, Danielle created a vibe we weren't used to. Someone like her tended not to really see a group like ours if we were to pass by in the school hallways, and now here she was with us for a long stretch of time.

There were a couple of times I requested a stop for water and to rest a bit, but really it was for a very different reason I hadn't told anyone. For the past four months I'd been having some very worrying symptoms, a pain in my side and intermittent nausea, and back aches, and it all seemed to be increasing very slowly. Two weeks from that weekend was going to be a very big date for me: I would turn eighteen, and it was more important than anyone realized. I had planned to finally go to a doctor and have myself looked at then, because at eighteen I wouldn't have to tell my parents about it. I had been raised strictly as a Christian Scientist, and even though I didn't think my parents would forbid me from seeing a doctor, I felt the pressure to pray and try to outthink what seemed to be happening to me, which was how I'd been raised. And to go it alone, to not burden anyone else with my problem.

You had a combination of things happening there. One was the naivety of being so young, the belief that nothing truly serious could be wrong with me, and the other was a personality flaw, obviously. I felt a pressure from my mother and father that was likely not truly their doing, but I didn't want to disappoint or anger them. So the days progressed and I felt myself getting a little sicker, a little more in pain, but I had done nothing about it, imagining this magical day when at eighteen I could walk into a clinic and they would cure me with whatever dimes I'd saved from my summer jobs. But deep down I think I was very afraid that something was going very wrong inside me. My excitement over the trip masked that a little, I was feeling all right that day.

We were really taking our time, we swam and cobbled lunch together at this spot, here. I was so skinny back then I never even took my shirt off, I felt very self-conscious. At the Wonalancet shelter we saw this man, an older man, who looked pretty rough and unshaven, a huge old pack beside him, falling apart. He was eating from a can, sitting there, and I couldn't take my eyes off him. It reminded me that we were close to the wild, and maybe there were lives being lived there I couldn't possibly understand.

Between the shelter and the house on the pond was only about a forty-five-minute walk. About a half hour outside the shelter, we knew we were getting close, and we were hurrying a bit because we heard a little thunder far off in the distance sometimes and we were dripping with sweat, it was so muggy. But at one point we had stopped for just a minute so Lena could tie her shoe. When she stood up again, she didn't move, she was looking almost straight up, and she motioned to me, without speaking a word, to come over to her, and she pointed, up. I looked up, and very high in a

tree, I saw someone, perched in the highest branches. And what I saw bothered me so much that I just nodded to Lena as if to say, OK, I saw it, I got it, let's go, and I started to walk again, and she followed. I think by the look on my face she knew that I had registered everything she had, but that we should keep moving because I was as confused as she was, we were on the same page. That was one of the least traveled parts of the trail, kind of a dry stretch, even on summer weekends not a lot of traffic.

It was only a few minutes before we felt OK to mention it to the others. Out of context, it meant nothing much, but whoever was sitting up so high in the trees was wearing something very odd. It looked like it might have been just the top half of an animal costume, like a spotted leopard, and Lena agreed. The top half of a leopard costume. To which Bret replied that tree leopards were responsible for forty hiker deaths a year in New Hampshire and that we should keep moving. Everyone seemed to find the whole thing a little funnier than I did, or Lena did.

But we got to the house without incident at around two o'clock. The house was just two hundred yards from the trail, which kept going into the Merriman Forest itself, where the terrain could get a little rough for suburban kids like ourselves.

Something I'd kind of forgotten about, because it seemed pretty insignificant to us for the weekend, was this old brown shed, at the edge of the property. This was built at the same time the main house was, in 1961. But after a flood, Grandpa Mike had never corrected a problem in the foundation, he thought it was too expensive. So the shed was more or less abandoned, and when my parents had inherited the property, it sort of came along as a minor liability.

Here's an aerial view of the layout, again from police evidence. You can see that there was no main road to the house per se. To get to it you had to go down this single lane unpaved thing that fed out in two directions to a country road called Ridly Road. So the house felt fairly secluded, but in reality it wasn't exactly cut off. In fact, there was a little general store down the road and something that had just started to be constructed, it was going to be an indoor children's theme park for summer tourists.

I remember all of us going into the house, and just thinking *Wow, it's all ours*, and we all claiming rooms to sleep in. And then we explored the property a bit. No one had mowed that summer yet, so it was kind of a jungle. Walking around the back is when I revealed a secret to Justin, which was that I wasn't sure if I'd be able to come with everyone when we took the canoes out on the pond the next day—Grandpa Mike had two of them—because I was worried about not having time to finish this giant list of tasks my father had given me involving the house. I took out of my pocket this comically big piece of paper, printed on my dot matrix printer I guess, this checklist of cleaning and maintenance tasks that had been part of the conditions of me being allowed to use the house. Here I was on maybe the last getaway with my high school friends, and I was going to have to spend half of it raking and scrubbing the bathtubs. Of course, Justin understood about thankless obligations.

What we all seemed to want except Danielle, who was all energy, was a nap, so we retired to our rooms and collapsed for a while. I was downstairs here, and you can see where everyone else decided to camp and drop their stuff upstairs. I was in a semi-finished basement with a washer dryer and not much else except for my little room enclosure, everyone else got a nicer spot.

We've all been in places like this basement a thousand times, where you see the insulation peeking through and the ductwork and it seems very cold and metallic and there's too much cement. I notice that a lot of restaurants have adopted this trend of exposed pipes and ducts and distressed cement floors, it became very in vogue at some point, still is, and I find I can't go into any of them, because

I immediately begin to tremble badly and my heart races and I can't breathe. It's another part of the legacy of that weekend, I guess you'd say.

Dinner took up most of our attention then. Each one of us had some component of it we'd hiked out there, and it became a very Home Ec class kind of vibe, a lot of fun as we pieced together our dinner for the night. We ate at about five, five-thirty out on the back deck. At one point we had to gather up all the stuff and dodge a very quick passing rainshower, and after that the weather held almost all night. Over dinner we bored Danielle a little because Lena wanted to read something to all of us, it was a funny piece she'd found in a magazine, by Fran Leibowitz. She loved to read aloud, she liked working on her voice, she was always self-conscious about it. She'd been teased sometimes, she hated how high-pitched it was. So Danielle left that to us and went to turn on—I think it was an episode of *Fame*, the TV show.

I mentioned that Lena had become a practitioner of Subud, which is an acronym of Susila Budhi Dharma. There were about ten thousand people worldwide at the time who practiced it. In Subud there is a spiritual exercise called the Latihan, it's meant to draw power and guidance from the Great Life Force. This is something that is usually done in groups but can be done in isolation. Lena performed Latihan once a week, like clockwork. I can think of a couple of times where the four of us had rearranged plans so she could, and she'd told us she intended to do it that weekend, she thought it would be the perfect place. In Latihan she would sit and empty her mind, and she told us that sometimes, not often, she felt herself become imbued with some feeling of connection to something bigger than herself, very warm and secure, and she thought she could sometimes feel her soul fluttering inside her chest, a physical feeling which she said a lot of Subud practitioners could replicate during Latihan. She was always a little cautious before mentioning this to Bret—Bret Smuckers did not have the most accepting world view when it came to spirituality. He said once, If God was real, He would not have allowed *Teen Wolf 2* to happen.

At about six-thirty, Lena washed up and told us she was going out to do Latihan for about a half hour. She would go out near the shed to do that, the clearing between the back of the shed and the trail. She said that week she had very specific questions she wanted to get guidance to.

I remember watching Bret watching Lena walk across the back of the property toward the guest house. I was in the kitchen looking out onto the deck, and he was out there looking down at her from high above. He never took his eyes off her as she walked through the grass. It was a look on his face like I wasn't used to, a very serious look, like adulthood was catching up to him all at once in one moment, like he was realizing Lena would be gone soon, and we were all going to be sad about that. To me his face had always looked like his last name, just a little silly, but not right then.

At about seven-fifteen, Lena came back to the house and told us she'd gone into the old brown shed, she'd tried the door because I'd mentioned there might be some more blankets inside we could use, since we didn't quite have enough to go around, we'd have to improvise a little. She had looked in for just a minute, and then come to get us. She wanted us to come look at what she'd found. So again, it was Lena being the first one to experience something a little strange.

All of us went out to the shed with her, and it was getting dark by then, so out came a couple flashlights, there were plenty of them in the house. We tramped off across the lawn. And I will always think I was the one who seemed the most uncomfortable in that environment, under the dark sky, out there in the woods. It was very alien to me, the insects seemed deafening, the woods seemed so dark and sort of haunted. I would look at my friends, and I would look at Danielle, and I would wonder how they seemed so composed in this different world so far away from people, from our parents. Or maybe they weren't, maybe we were all acting a little for each other's sake. And on the way at one point I almost bent over in pain on my left side. I told Bret I'd just pulled something

on the hike that was still bothering me. Being out there with my friends had made me briefly forget my health problem, but it came back in that moment as if it was warning me. I had fourteen more days till I turned eighteen, fourteen more days till I could feel good about getting treatment.

We found things in the shed that didn't make sense. From the time we found them to the time the police took these photographs, the key objects were not moved. You can see a big piece of tarp in the corner, folded in such a way to suggest it may have been used as a blanket—notice how it's bunched up on one end, as if someone was trying to fashion a head rest, a kind of pillow. There was a pair of mismatched shoes, one size 11, one size 12, both men's sneakers but of varying ages seemingly, one much more worn than the other. There was an old pot of water that was later found to be pond water; there in the dark the four of us didn't know that, we assumed it was regular drinking water.

In and of themselves, there was not much reason to be overly suspicious of any of this particular set of things. Keep in mind that none of us had ever been in the shed before, and that included me except for one time about two years before. My memory didn't really go back that far with any detail. So we wouldn't know what sort of things we might find out there. There was also a fairly bad smell there in the shed, like an animal may have died in or near it, so we didn't stay long.

I called my father when we got back inside the house and I let him know that there was maybe a homeless person who had been living in the shed, I described what we'd found. When I did this pretty much everyone was in earshot of me, and all they saw me do was nod a lot and say, *OK Dad, OK, Dad*, like that, and I hung up the phone and I said to everybody that my Dad didn't see a problem, but that he did want to couple of things brought into the house before it got full dark. That visibly relieved everyone I think, and I started out. But on the way out the back door on the first floor, I asked Justin if he wanted to come with me because I could use another pair of hands, and he said yes.

In actuality my father had told me something very different on the phone. But I hadn't wanted to alarm anyone. Justin and I were walking across the back yard toward the shed again and I told him quietly that my father had confirmed that no, none of those things should have been in there. What he had told me to do was go back out to the shed and chain-lock it, there was a chain-lock in there. Instead of calling the police, which he'd said frankly would likely have been pointless, he'd said to just lock it up, make sure the house doors were locked, and he would deal with the shed later. I wanted Justin to know more than anyone else because he had that maturity about him, I thought I could pretty much tell him anything and his reaction would be a very sober one.

So out there I held the flashlight and Justin went about securing the shed with an old padlock and chain. He was far better with mechanisms than I was. He was working very quickly, that was obvious, neither one of us was very comfortable being out there, it was now full dark. We could hear, very faintly, some laughter coming from the house, Danielle's laughter.

We got that done, but first we realized we'd have to pull the two canoes out of the shed and leave them in the grass for the next day. As we were doing that, Justin started to talk. He told me that he was having trouble chilling out that weekend—and actually I'm not even sure we said that phrase back then—he was having trouble relaxing, and he told me that he needed to spend some of the money he was making with his part-time job clerking at his father's law office on a math tutor. Math was the subject he'd had trouble with since sixth grade, but no amount of effort seemed to help Justin, brilliant Justin, grasp the more advanced concepts of geometry, trigonometry. He was a wiz at everything else, but he was genuinely worried that if he started classes in September he wasn't going to handle UNH, so he needed to start now. Knowing Justin, I felt like he was genuinely

confused about his own inability to get this one thing right, and the possibility of real failure, the kind of failure I'd had with chemistry class, scared him.

Mr. Walpole, his trig teacher who was notoriously humorless, had passed him with a C after Justin's father had talked with him at length, and this had mortified Justin, this intervention, the three of them sitting in a room and Justin's father essentially apologizing for him, and Mr. Walpole barely even looking at him. Justin told me as we were walking back across the lawn in the gloom that he'd had a nightmare just that week about Mr. Walpole, even after never having to talk to the man again. Justin said to me, *You know, he always talked to me like he was on to me, no adult ever talked to me like that.* I've thought about this in the intervening years; it was like Justin had one identity for me and my friends and all the adults that he so impressed with his A's and his pedigree, but this one man was seeing the failure in him, and that shook him. So the efforts to get on top of the math, I think they were very important and intimidating, kind of clouding his thoughts of his first semester.

These are a few more of the photos that the police took inside the shed—just some; in reality there were more than one hundred and fifty—so you can see that it corresponds to what I saw, and Justin, and Bret, and Lena, and Danielle. *These*, on the other hand, are pictures my father had taken of the shed about a year before, because he was trying to sell it to someone who'd bought a summer house just across the pond. He'd had the idea that it was mobile enough to move right off the property. Of course, what's not in these earlier pictures is the strange piece of tarp, and the pot of water, and the shoes, but let me go back and forth, and you'll see there's one thing that is actually missing from the police photos which *was* there in the pictures taken a year earlier. And that is this axe. It had been used just a couple of times for some old-fashioned woodchopping by my grandfather and then pretty much abandoned in the corner for good years before, our family weren't the greatest outdoorspeople.

This is the evidentiary close-up of the axe that was no longer there when we kids went into the shed. Like most people, I never knew the parts of an axe and how it has human attributes associated with it. This is a diagram I found that shows how every part of an axe does. Throat... shoulder... belly... eye. I've never been able to find out how these terms came to be, but I found that very interesting. In ancient folklore, ancient traditions, the axe is connected to all sorts of concepts: lightning, stopping rain... sometimes an axe would be buried in the soil to ward off bad weather. In the way it opens the earth, it was seen long ago as a kind of penetration of the spirit into the earth, a connectedness formed there.

Now, despite the unsettling feelings we'd gotten, we were teenagers and we were resilient and we tended to live in the moment, so I have to say that night at the house, that three-hour period when we got together in the living room, was one of the fondest memories I have of our little group, going back to second year of junior high school, it really is. There was a botched attempt to make S'mores out on the deck, we really didn't quite grasp all the necessary concepts, but Lena had opened our eyes that very day, the first time ever, to the concept of freezing Milky Ways. She'd ice-packed six of them and put them in her backpack, and hustled them into the freezer as soon as we'd gotten to the house, and we nibbled on those as all played Cribbage. It was actually Danielle who taught us Cribbage, she was an absolute demon at this game, her boyfriend had taught her, and she had this lovely handmade scoring board for the game she'd brought special.

She I think very intentionally sat beside Justin as we played. She was very involved with showing him things, and playfully grabbing at his cards and quickly rubbing his shoulders with mock sympathy if he lost an especially close round. We all sort of noticed this, he wasn't terribly comfortable with it I don't think, it was a lot of attention for him to receive from a girl all at once. Danielle was the only one of us who was having a little something adult to drink; she'd found a bottle of gin my father kept in a cupboard, which may have even belonged to Grandpa Mike for all

I knew, and she swore no one would ever notice if she just took two fingers' worth. And to her credit, that is all she drank.

After that we put on a movie Bret had rented, which was *The Believers* with Martin Sheen. And when the movie ended, Bret got very animated. One of his grand projects he'd envisioned for us to do someday was a horror movie. He had originally wanted to use the school's video camera, creatively borrow it, and get a bunch of people together and shoot this idea he had, and he really started pushing hard for it that night after watching *The Believers*, this is what we talked about. He was standing and acting things out as we laughed, but he was very serious.

The concept he had was all over the place but it was kind of interesting really. It was called "Echo Island." We all had parts we would play and Bret would too, he would also be the director. We were going to be research students dropped off at a remote island to take botanical extracts or some such. Bret even knew where we would shoot this, off Sandwich Bay, pretty close by. And for mysterious reasons, no one was allowed on the island, it was forbidden by the government, but Bret, playing a brilliant and charismatic young professor, a real renegade, would take his students out by boat in the middle of the night to get these extracts, which would cure some kind of disease or another. And when we were out there, improvising our dialogue no doubt, occasionally these hands would shoot up from the ground, grasping human hands, and they would grab us and pull us down into the earth. This was a dark secret of the island. There were no people attached to these hands; they were simply hands, and there would be one giant mother hand. Bret had been reading a book about practical effects and he explained how he knew how we could do the effect with cardboard boxes and so forth, and blue-screen and matte paintings, he was really excited, and we were all laughing and saying Yeah, you know what, we can do that just before summer ends, this is really a thing we could do.

It was Danielle who brought us down somewhat. She'd never heard such bull in her life, and she had all kinds of practical questions about the plausibility of this concept. I could see the tension growing in Bret, who did not like to be challenged. When he was he got very pouty and sullen; like the rest of us he didn't have an aggressive bone in his body, but Danielle did, and she kind of took the air out of the room then, she was none too delicate about any of it. It felt like she was kind of challenging all four of us in a way. Which was a little bit of a sour note before we all went to bed, at around eleven-thirty. I went down to my basement room and turned in, kind of overwhelmed by the day.

In recent weeks, when I laid down to sleep, all my mental defenses against the pain in my side and my back abandoned me, alone there in the dark, and the pain would always revisit me almost right away after the lights went off. So sometimes to deal with it, I would play a kind of a movie reel in my mind, my own version of meditation I suppose. And in it I would be entering a grand church, like nothing we had in Concord, a church like I imagined would only be found in medieval Europe, enormous and warm and lit by candlelight. And I would enter alone on a summer morning, at dawn, with birds singing everywhere in the trees, and the doors would close behind me. My version of counting sheep became blowing out row after row of tall candles that would be lined up all the way down the center aisle between the pews. One by one in my mind I blew them out, and I felt warm and safe. And eventually, I would fall asleep.

But that night in the house on Upper Kimball Pond, I was thinking more about Bret's horror movie. I was really hoping we'd do it, you know. What a great way for us all to hang out together for one last stretch before we got pulled apart, not just every few days but *every* day.

I would have told Bret a different story though. I thought I had a better idea for his movie, because I'm sure I was the only one of us who had ever heard of the Smoke Child. It was an actual legend

from colonial times, when the first English settlers came to the shores of Plymouth. It was written that those first winters were so hard that very soon no orphans could be cared for, there just wasn't enough food, enough wood, enough medicine, and so many were left to die. It was a fate to be deeply feared, to be orphaned with no hope in such a harsh place, it was a death sentence. Tales would be told and historians would later write about the Smoke Child, one parentless boy in particular forced to survive off the land when the grown men of Plymouth came for him to put him to a merciful death by drowning. He disappeared in terror, and in the forests of Scituate he became bestial, savage. He was even seen all the way west in Taunton and Swansea as the Plymouth colony expanded, eventually deep into the area we now call New England. And with time he became known as a spirit, a kind of phantom, like the wendigo. He would appear in the night and then vanish just as quickly, thus his name. The Smoke Child, it was written, knew only one thing: that no one he encountered must ever find out that he was an orphan, for that meant death. And he would kill whenever he felt his secret was threatened.

I woke up at a little past two in the morning, and nothing made this happen, no sound in particular, I just woke up. It might have been paranoia about the locks in the house, because I got up then and I decided to just check the locks in the front and the back, no big deal. I had been trusted with his house and I never stopped worrying about it, especially after the shed.

So I left the room and I went up to the main floor, and right away, in a weird coincidence, standing at the top of the steps in the dark was Danielle, in a t-shirt and shorts. She was saying that she'd heard something and the back door was open. I followed her very quietly through the living room, and yes, it was ajar, it was open about eight inches. She thought that Lena had gone out, and I said, *Well why would she want to do that?* Danielle didn't know, but maybe it was part of her prayers—that's what she called them, her prayers. I said I'd go take a walk out there, and she said *OK, I'm going back to sleep.* I kind of watched her go up the steps to the top floor, and she turned left at the top of them instead of right. To go to the right, I knew that's where her room was, but left, down the hall, was Justin's room. Not hers, Justin's. So I wasn't sure what was going on there, I actually waited at the bottom of the stairs for her to reappear and correct herself; maybe she was sleepy and disoriented. But she never did.

Out back the night was very calm. I walked about halfway across the back yard toward the shed, and then I veered off, away from it, it made me very nervous. I went toward the opening at the back of the property where you could step onto the Corn Husk Trail, and beside that, the pond. I was half-scared of the night but half-emboldened too. It felt so freeing to be out that late, so far away from home.

I literally almost stepped on something that was lying in the grass very close to the shed, on the side facing away from the house, and here that thing is. It was folded over, so even if it had been daylight it might have looked only like a carpet sample or something. This is the bottom half of some kind of costume, later identified as the property of Prince Whipple High School six miles away. I didn't even touch it, that was for someone to do later. It was found to be extremely dirty, even moldy, infested with ants. Somehow I do not remember making the mental connection to what we had seen up in the tree just the day before, earlier that same day really, kind of an extraordinary blackout on my part, but it wouldn't have changed anything, it would have only made me more afraid than I already was.

I parted the trees and I could see the pond there, and turning to my left, I saw a shape walking away from me down the trail. Just by the way he walked I knew it was Bret. Bret was out here in the middle of the night. I said his name and he turned around but he didn't come closer, I had to go to him. I asked him what was up and he clearly seemed agitated, not like himself. He said he was just walking, he needed to get out. He said, *I don't get her, man, I guess I just don't get her.* Like I was supposed to know who he was talking about. He was talking about Lena. He said *I just don't get her* and he turned away from me and he began to walk down the trail, just going away kind of quickly, very aggravated, obviously wanting to be alone.

I was totally confused. Walking back, I looked out on the pond and I saw a black smudge out there on the water in the moonlight, a canoe, just drifting along, the water was perfectly still. I made my way along the trail hugging the shoreline of the pond, and I managed to get a little closer to the canoe, which was only about a hundred yards off the shore. And I saw someone in the canoe who might have been Lena. I raised my hand, and she raised her hand back, but she made no move to paddle towards me. There was something very non-recreational about what she was doing, she was just drifting. And even though she was just a silhouette, I could see that she had turned away, she didn't want to have any more contact at that moment. So it was Lena, that much was clear. And I figured she and Bret must have been out here together for some reason, having pulled one of the canoes down into the water, so late at night. I sat on the bank for a little bit, waiting for her, but she was not coming back in, she kept drifting, making no more contact with me.

I started walking down the trail to catch up to Bret. He already well out of sight. I had a flashlight with me so I could see enough to keep going, but I didn't understand why he had gone so far, because without a flashlight—and he definitely didn't have one—it was just impossibly dark out there. The minutes passed, and the furthest I was willing to go was this little landmark on the water here, this beaten old pier that was the property of the people who owned a lightless house up the ridge, they seemed to be gone.

At that point, you can see from the map what had happened here geographically: a separation had occurred. The five of us were spread out as much as we could realistically be. I was now almost a quarter mile from the point on the shore where Lena would have pushed off in the canoe.

I turned back and I called Bret's name out a couple of times and got no answer. There was a breakoff path, very small thing, right here. Its only purpose was to serve as a long cut-through to Ridly Road. As we'd been walking that day, Justin and Bret had accidentally turned and started down this path before I reminded everyone we had farther to go. I shone the flashlight down it. I only had a range of about fifty feet with the light. I was afraid to go down there alone. This is a pretty much the exact view I had, I duplicated it for this photograph I took two weeks ago, I tried to even approximate the wattage of the flashlight.

I didn't have to go anywhere though, because I saw something there, at the edge of the beam's reach, and I went toward it. It was someone's arm. It had been severed from someone's body several inches above the elbow.

My first reaction was to backpedal, and as I did so I saw the rest of the body in the dark, it was only about twenty feet away on the path. The initial attack must have taken place at the spot where the arm was, and then the victim, who was Bret, had run or staggered forward in an attempt to get away. In the dark I didn't see nearly as much blood as there probably was, and in fact I have never seen a photograph that depicted the area in enough detail to show that.

Bret was lying perfectly face up and his face was completely pale, entirely gray. I didn't think he was breathing. The middle of his chest looked like maybe some animal had gotten at it. There was

a giant, almost perfectly round dark stain from his neck all the way down to his stomach and spanning his torso. For some reason in the moment I thought I needed to see his eyes very closely, so I knelt and leaned over real close to them, because they were open, though either the right or left one, I don't remember which, had a great splotch of blood in it; in fact for a second I thought Bret's nose was gone, but it was just that blood had streaked upwards from his chest and obscured it, so that his face looked like it was in two distinct halves, separated by this thick line of blood. His eyeballs were glassy and enlarged. I was with him for all of ten seconds, probably, and that was it, no attempt at resuscitation, I took the impression that he was dead. I think I said his name maybe twenty or thirty times as if that would revive him somehow. I feel I need to give a warning about this next photo, this police photo, of Bret's body.

When I've been frightened before in the past, of course like everyone else my hands shake, but something else was happening, a once in a lifetime phenomenon I hope—this kind of shaking was more like I was having terrible exaggerated muscle tremors. I was having trouble even holding the flashlight, I was like a small child taken out of freezing water before someone can be there with a blanket, and my legs gave out the first time I tried to turn and use them, just gave out entirely like someone had removed the muscles entirely. But then I was able to get up and run back down the path. I was calling out for Lena, but I think no sound was coming out of my mouth. And all the pain in my side which had been persisting since I'd awoken vanished under the adrenaline.

Lena wasn't on the pond anymore. It had been about twenty minutes since I'd last seen her. She had pulled the canoe into the shore; it was almost as if she had waited for me to go out of sight and then immediately come back in, like she was avoiding me as well as Bret. So I ran for the house immediately. As I went something happened to the flashlight. I must have dropped it because it was found just in the water, about a foot off the shore. I didn't even realize it. The police found this troubling and convenient, because obviously, in the flashlight rolling or being dropped into the water, fingerprints, possibly bloody fingerprints, would be removed and in general make the timeline of my actions more difficult to interpret.

I was terrified to go near that shed as I ran through the yard, so I believe I found this extra burst of speed as I went past it. You see here how I would have gotten into the back door of the house, and it was where Lena was trying to get to. Lena was lying in the grass just about twenty feet before the back door, which had become unlocked. She had suffered two severe axe strikes. The coroner's report determined that the cause of death was probably not the deep one to her upper back, which may have incapacitated her, but a second strike which damaged the right half of her neck and opened up a wound from which blood flowed freely. She was likely dead within moments. There was no physical evidence that she had been able to elude her assailant at all after that first axe swing. She went down and did not crawl forward.

My body took me inside the house—I won't comment about what my mind was doing, because it was somewhere else, somewhere it had never been that was unknowable, so I think in terms of my body alone. Up the basement stairs in the dark, and into the living room. I still had enough awareness to get to the phone right away and to know what I had to ask my father. As the phone rang at the house sixteen miles away, I was constantly moving my eyes from one corner of the living room to the next in this constant paranoid rotation. I didn't turn on the lights, I was afraid to see anything.

My father picked up, coming awake from sleeping, and he made out from my babbling that something terrible had happened and I needed to call the police but I didn't know the address of the house, I had never really known the actual address. And he was very calm and he gave it to me and it didn't matter one bit, because I didn't retain one single fragment of that information. He heard in my voice that I was in serious danger and he said he was coming and he asked if I could

get outside the house. Hearing this, my father told me that if I couldn't get out, that I should go into the basement and go through the door behind the Welsh dresser. That was the last thing we said to each other. I disconnected and I dialed 911. I told the operator that people were dead and that I was in a house on Ridly Road with a stone mailbox in front of it near the general store. Then hung up.

The place my father had told me to go if I couldn't get out of the house was a place I did not know existed. I had known about the basement, yes, but not the annex to it. It had never been mentioned, in all my life. I did not go down there. But I will show you a combination of photographs here. This is the very large Welsh dresser that had been placed in front of the door to the annex at some point. When this was moved away, here is the entrance. And here are photographs of what the annex consisted of, where my father believed I would be safer. You can see it was nothing more than a great hollow with these wooden supports built through it, there was no electricity in there. One bend to the left, making the shape of an L. And it's just a dead end. My father meant well with this panicked suggestion, but in reality it would have been a death trap. We'll come back to this annex a little later, and what the police thought it may have meant.

I found myself unable to leave the house until I knew if Justin and Danielle were all right and if they could help me, and that meant going upstairs. I went up in the dark. The 911 dispatcher had told me they would be at the house within minutes. I had with me a cane, my Grandpa Mike's cane, which had been against the wall near the phone. This was my protection, a cane. I turned left at the top of the stairs and went into Justin's room, the door was open. It was dark in there. And the window was open. The bed was rumped a little, like someone had been lying in it. I went to the window itself, and looked out and down.

There had been a confrontation there, in the bedroom, though there was no blood. Justin had been able to ward someone off, or Justin had heard something that sent him out the window, believing he was safest trying to get out. And he had jumped and landed in the worst possible way, but probably he had fallen, and died of injuries to his neck upon hitting the ground. He had hit the ground in such a way as to cause death before the police and ambulance could arrive. So when I looked out the window I saw him down there in the dark, not moving. No visible blood. It had begun to rain very lightly, Justin's body was getting wet.

I went back out into the hallway, and I'm not sure why I didn't go toward Danielle's room. Instead I went back down the stairs, because I was headed out. I intended to run for the main road and keep moving until the police came. Running felt like the safest thing to do.

I got out of the house through the front door. In front of me was the yard and the gravel path that led about a fifth of a mile to Ridly Road. And standing right there, at the point where the path first began to bend, there was a person, hunched over, holding an axe in one hand, upright but down next to his side, so the wooden tip of the axe was perched in the grass. And this person saw me and immediately began to come for me. Suddenly the axe was in both hands, and he was coming.

Here was my position, approximately, in the red circle. You can see that there was a choice to be made, and it was made by pure instinct and fear. I chose to run the way the arrow is pointing on the screen, toward the woods. I knew the woods were not the most dense and this was a way also to get to Ridly Road. If I ran fast enough, I could make it, but nothing would get me back inside that house again despite the fact that I could have shut the front door behind me and probably had time to lock it. So the thing in the yard would have to chase me into the woods, and that is exactly what happened.

I was going blind into the woods, and it was really raining now, a thunderhead was passing over. It must be said that I felt almost like I was flying, almost like I was aloft, there was such electricity in my body. But I knew I was being chased. My screaming did come then, finally. It was just the word *help* over and over.

This is the layout of the area as I ran, and in the middle of the night clearly no one was going to hear me until I got to at least here, and the very bad mistake I made was that Ridly Road is accessed from *this* spot, here. Where I was running to, bending to the left, was *away* from that, I was running toward a more desolate area, and if I kept going the police would arrive from this direction to find just an empty house with dead bodies. But this information meant nothing to me, I was completely out of control. I knew one thing, which was that the thing with the axe was coming for me, and I had to live.

These are my photos from two months ago. The woods in that area were pretty thin, with some open clearings that were very bumpy and chewed, but it allowed me to move so fast that I couldn't understand why after just a couple of minutes I hadn't hit the road yet. It was because my sense of direction was shot in the dark and the rain. Pretty soon I could feel my lungs start to give out, and then I thought I had found some kind of safety, because there were lights up ahead through the trees, very dim, but they looked like house lights to me. I kept screaming as I got closer. I took exactly one look behind me as I ran but my field of vision behind me was just a blur of rain and dark. But I thought I could hear running feet in addition to my own.

I came out of the woods and I was running toward the lights and I saw there was no house. It was something very different. In April of that year construction had begun on the Merriman Fun Center, phase one scheduled to be completed by September 15, just before the snows came that year. This was the indoor children's amusement park that still stands today, more than thirty years later, still in operation during the spring, summer, and fall. Bounce houses, trampolines, bowling, and an arcade. At that time, on June 20th, the foundation was still in the process of being laid, and just a few lights were kept on during the night by safety law. The area had been surrounded only by very weak slanted orange fencing that only came up above the knee in some places, and it didn't even connect all the way around. There was a maze of tall iron and steel supports in front of me, and big sections of cement wall here and there, some of it connecting to other sections but some of it not. No ceilings anywhere. I was looking at the beginning of the construction of that first level. And I ran right into the heart of that structure, and as I did, I could hear a police siren in the distance.

And when I say a maze, that's really what it was. I was maneuvering through this place that seemed designed to stop me. The surface was dirt in some places, sometimes a two or three foot pile of it blocking me. The cement walls had these big cutouts in the middle, maybe to make it easy for materials to be passed through, and a couple of times I had to climb through one. In another place, I almost overran a drop of about three feet to a slightly lower level dug more deeply into the ground. The pathetic lights didn't do anything when I got deep into this place, it was dark.

I was so winded I finally had to stop, I just had to. So I pressed myself with my back against one of the cement walls. It only went to about a foot over my head, and I listened to the siren, but it faded, and that was an awful moment, to think that maybe I was wrong about what it meant.

It felt like I just wasn't going to be able to get my breath back. That just wasn't going to happen. That was the first moment I realized how heavy the rain really was. I was getting soaked. The siren had stopped and there was that soft tapping of the rain on dirt all around me. I could hear things very clearly then.

It was only about a minute after I had stopped running that I heard a thump, like someone had jumped from one elevation to another. Down to where I was.

I've tried to show here in a sketch from memory where my pursuer went by me, on my left, when I got my closest look at him, from ten feet away. He was moving very slowly and deliberately, and it was only because he didn't turn his head to the right that he didn't see me cowering in place. The boy was about average height for someone maybe thirteen years old, holding the axe in both hands as he moved. He had medium length hair that looked very ragged, uncombed, black hair if I had to guess. And he was completely naked, he wasn't wearing anything at all. His right arm was coated in blood from shoulder to wrist.

He went past a divide where parts of two cement walls met. And he was gone. I didn't have much logical thought left but I had a powerful instinct to be hidden until I felt he was *truly* gone. Just off to my right there was a triangular stack of cement pipes, three of them, that were incredibly long, thirty feet maybe. I held my breath, I was trying to make no sound, and I climbed into the one on top of this pyramidal stack, it was about three feet high, there was room to maneuver inside. I went deeper and deeper, and as it got ever darker I felt safer. In my mind even if my pursuer were to find me inside this pipe, he would have to come in there or he would have no ability to attack me, I was deluded into thinking I had an advantage there. I stopped at the midpoint of the pipe and I pushed my back against the curve and I curled up tight into a ball, and I watched the rain coming down through the holes on either side of the pipe. Inside it really sounded loud, hitting the outside of the pipe.

I was constantly turning my head from one viewpoint of one end of the pipe to the other, and once when I looked to the end opposite of where I had crawled into, I saw a face, but it was a different face. It was a woman. She was standing in the rain and partially leaning into the pipe and she was beckoning me, waving me with one hand to come to her. And I felt I had been saved. The police were here.

But as soon as I started to move toward her, I heard something slam above me. Something made of iron or steel struck the outside of the pipe with tremendous force very near where my head was. It shot this echo into my ears that deadened my hearing, it blacked it out. I screamed at this woman to help me but she just kept waving at me, *Come on, come on*. What I believe was the axe hit the pipe one more time, like whoever was out there thought he could hack through it, but this time it sounded muddled because my eardrums had sustained real damage. I crawled very painfully on my hands and knees toward the end of the pipe, toward this woman. Even before I got to her, she was moving ahead of me. I jumped out onto the ground and she was already twenty or thirty feet ahead, *Come on, come on*, now she had a real voice and I saw her whole body. She was old, she was in her sixties maybe, and I ran after her.

She was almost impossible to keep up with but she seemed to know exactly what turns to take among all the walls and the dirt piles and the stacks of iron and pipe, and the temporary cement and steel supports. She was incredibly quick and she was taking a lot of turns, and sometimes she would go out of sight and then appear again, and she was only getting farther and farther away. But then she was scrambling up an incline and she was out of the maze entirely, and so was I. I was in a clearing and Ridly Road was ahead of us. That was where I lost her in the dark. She had accelerated on foot so much that she vanished to me. And then my shoes were on the pavement on the road, and just a few seconds after that is where my memory stopped for a time, right about when a police car spotted me on the road. One of the two officers inside it claimed, rather controversially, that my first movements in his sight were not of hysterical panic but of deliberate evasion. They caught up to me quickly.

Danielle's time of death was unofficially judged to have occurred most likely after Justin leapt or fell or was pushed from the window of his bedroom. The upstairs hallway was just too dark for me to have seen her body. She had fallen just outside the door to her own bedroom and was apparently headed there. Maybe she wasn't able to get down the stairs.

I think this next photograph is the most graphic, and I apologize... there was a gouge here, in the wall at the end of the hallway, and based on the spray of the blood shown here and what happened to Danielle, it was thought that she had been pushed momentarily against the wall and then with seemingly one swing of the axe, she was killed, the axe head probably went through her, five feet eight inches off the floor, and caused what it caused.

I was sedated for a little over twenty-four hours, and I was actually moved out of the county with as much secrecy as was allowed, there was so much attention immediately about what happened. I was allowed to rest a while after that, and after a couple of doctors judged that I was no longer under any real influence of the meds, the questions began.

The detective who questioned me the most was this woman, Deborah Chopin of the New Hampshire Police. She'd been a detective for about eleven years. She initially had me tell the story without interruption over the course of two hours. She was very firm in this, she didn't want to interrupt me at all, so I got it all out and she came back the next morning. There were a lot of things she did not understand, to say the least.

Most of this case, of course, was about physical evidence, but Ms. Chopin didn't challenge me on any of that at first. She wanted to know before anything why I had suggested this trip to the people who were all now dead. What was it about this isolated location, this set of circumstances, I had thought would be a good idea? She pointed out that based on what I'd told her already, I had never done this kind of hike or even this kind of overnight stay before, not one time in my life. And yet I had said to my friends, Let's go here. At this time. Walk into the woods by ourselves, just us.

Just about a week after the incident, the police came across the letters I'd kept in my desk drawer at home. There were three of them, just three, about a page long each. These were letters I'd never sent, and never really planned to send, written between March and May of 1988. They had been written to Lena. I've put one up on the screen here. They were called love letters, and certainly that is correct. In one, I agonized to her about what I perceived as the religious issue between us and my fear of my parents' disapproval of her dropping out of our church to go her own way, and in this passage here you can see how uneducated I was about Subud, having childishly done no research into it, thinking it was an intense Eastern philosophy that my mom and dad would not believe could co-exist with us. My writing was mopey and self-absorbed and flowery, yes, of course, being seventeen. You can see what a bad poet I might have turned out to be, but who among us has not written such letters? These just confirmed that Lena and I had never spoken about a possible dating relationship. She'd never given any indication she wanted one, and neither had I. It was adolescent pining, pure and simple.

But Detective Chopin believed that perhaps I came to perceive Bret Smuckers as a rival for Lena's affection, probably before that weekend. She began to suggest I was in a great deal of confusion leading up to June 20. Wracked by pain I was keeping a secret, I was approaching the moment when my only friends were breaking away from me, especially Lena. I was feeling pressured and maybe angered by my restrictive parents, who I thought might be keeping me from Lena and my own physical health; Chopin believed I had deeply internalized my upbringing. And then Danielle had

entered the picture, Danielle who seemed maybe to very suddenly be taking Justin from me. In the eyes of a virginal, somewhat lonely teenager, this all represented a storm of inner conflict.

I was extensively checked out by doctors just before I was allowed to go home with my parents. My ailment proved to be a kidney and lung infection that was in fact treatable. And it has never been a problem since it was cured in the summer of 1988.

The weeks passed, with me never leaving my parents' house, and lots of questions continuing. Detective Chopin asked me more extensively about my past with my friends, as she felt the picture that was emerging was not quite how I'd initially depicted it. Her opinion was that while Justin, Bret, and Lena were in fact my only friends, they themselves did have others. Their world had not revolved around mine as mine had around theirs.

But as I said before, the case really was about physical evidence, and eventually in 1989 I was in fact charged and arrested, at the age of eighteen, and there was a trial.

Footprint evidence was a very tricky thing in 1988, still is today. If there is blood at an outdoor crime scene and it rains, the blood may become so diluted that testing of the blood becomes impossible. But inside the house, despite probable contamination of the scene all over by my footprints and those of the first responders, no hard evidence of bare footprints was found. Nor were any fingerprints or hairs suggesting an outsider had come in and caused the deaths of my friends.

Other problems lingered too. My path on the trail suggested that the assailant would likely have to have either passed me or passed very near me in the dark after the murder of Bret Smuckers and before the murder of Lena Mitri. Yet I had been conveniently spared. The axe itself was found in Upper Kimball Pond close to the old brown shed. Still partially bloody, but with no fingerprints. And of fingerprints on the objects inside the shed, the tarp, the container of water, there were none at all. The police could not determine just when those objects had been placed. The bottom half of the leopard mascot costume was similarly without usable prints, but its condition was very deteriorated.

There were a couple of points in my favor. The pattern of my own footprints inside the house did not prove much of anything, in particular a confrontation with either Justin or Danielle. And when I had claimed that the assailant had attempted to hack through that cement pipe to either get at me or flush me out in the waning minutes of this catastrophe, that claim seemed to be supported by some markings on the exterior of the pipe, although it was pointed out at the trial that these could have been manufactured and it wasn't possible to tell what object made those marks. The surfaces all around that foundation and the woods around it were hopelessly slick and muddy, and the rain ruined most evidence of anyone's presence there.

I should confess now that I never told the police about the woman I saw who had guided me out of that foundation. The reason for this is simple: Even I don't think she was real. There were split second moments when I believe I got a good look at her face, and yes, I do believe it was a momentary projection borne from my mental trauma, a projection into the future. I believe that woman was Lena. The older Lena who never became old, never became a woman in her sixties like I saw that night. It was essentially the same face, but aged, with long flowing gray hair instead of her long flowing black hair, the kind of hair she shared with her cousin Danielle. It was ten years before I told anyone about that aspect of my escape from the foundation of the Merriman Fun Center.

The last part of the trial—and I've blocked out a lot of it, to be honest—featured a bit of prosecutorial overreach. The state prosecutor, Henry Odette, had a slightly crazed theory that the

reason none of us had taken any photos that weekend of our trip down the trail and at the house was because maybe I had very specifically told my friends not to bring cameras. No one's parents, not even my own, seemed to remember quite what I was wearing when I left my house, and so there was no way to really know for sure without pictures whether maybe there two sets of my clothes: one with my friends' blood all over them, and one I had actually been wearing when I stumbled onto Ridly Road. Maybe I had buried those bloody clothes and then changed, Odette thought. But no trove of my clothing was ever found. Odette got a lot of criticism for hitting this theory so hard, but many did find it odd that no one had brought a camera to get shots of such an important trip. I offer a simple explanation for why we didn't: We just thought we'd have more chances.

As for the strange annex to the basement of the house. It was my father, my poor suffering father, who eventually had to endure the most severe questioning about it, and especially why he had never told anyone in the family it was there. As part of the investigation, it had been examined extensively, and faint traces of blood were visible in two places on the wooden supports, but it was not the blood of anyone related to any of the events of that weekend. In fact, it was at least twenty years old.

The annex was not part of the original construction; my grandfather, Grandpa Mike, had apparently built it himself, maybe for extra storage, but that big cold space was totally empty, and because he'd died in 1981, he wasn't around to answer questions about it. My father said *he'd* discovered it by accident after Grandpa Mike died, and felt it made sense to block it off.

It was determined those traces of blood were actually from two different people, neither ever identified. Both long gone now, maybe. Deborah Chopin was quite obsessed by that blood, I'll tell you, to the point where she shared every petty thing she found out about my Grandpa Mike to my parents.

I wrote to her a few months ago, she's retired now. And I said in that letter, Tell me something. Throughout my trial, and the state's inability to make it clear whether I at seventeen had planned everything or was set off by something that happened at the house itself that night, through their loss of key physical evidence, all the conflicting things about the case... did you ever really think that maybe my grandfather or even my father had committed some unspeakable crimes in the past and had been trying to cover them up, and maybe some kind of homicidal darkness had been passed to me? Did you ever *really* believe that?

I got no response. My father died in 1991. The house by the pond, the brown shed, the basement annex, were all entirely torn down a year later.

Over the years I've gotten all kinds of mail, as you can imagine, a lot of it condemnatory of course, God knows how these people keep finding me now. But once in a while I will get a letter from someone who believes they've seen the Smoke Child somewhere in New England, and wants to let me know that he's still out there, still afraid, still dangerous.

I keep all the letters I get. Each one helps me remember Justin and Bret and Lena, and even Danielle. I don't ever think I should stop.

From the lecture room, he drove directly to the small town of Grafton eighty miles east, arriving just before one in the morning. He parked the car at the top of Isinglass Mountain, and bracing himself

against the cold, descended the path toward Ruggles Mine with a stranger's hand-drawn map to guide him.

There, in the open ravine, he shone a flashlight around the aging rock formations, the crumbling arches, and the curious pockets, walking in all directions. He stopped short of entering the tunnels. He stood outside the mouth of one for almost an hour, watching and listening for signs of movement. But there were none.

Finally he drove back to his motel, and there he sat on the edge of the bed just before dawn, listening to one of his meditation tapes and imagining himself entering a church in summertime as neither man, nor adolescent, nor little boy—only a body released from time, finding warmth in the ceaseless candlelight.

pride

My name is John Ross Simon. Even before the *Rolling Stone* interview that destroyed my life, things were not completely rosy within my band. I felt we'd topped out creatively five years before, and my lead guitarist and co-lyricist, Liz Kargus, and I, were constantly scrapping over our direction, with her wanting a bigger and bigger sound and me clawing to keep the studio musicians out. It had gotten so tense sometimes that during one tiff in New York over the order of our set list at Lehman Center, she'd thrown a paper plate of chicken salad at my head. Meanwhile our bassist, Lenny Stern, was constantly leaving for weeks at a time to make another appearance in some indie movie and was slogging through the world's longest divorce, from his high school sweetheart. Maybe it was the hurt over my own recent divorce that loosened my tongue too much on the day of the interview, made me even more cynical than I normally was. Liz always said one day I'd fall backwards into my own mouth and choke on one of my own diatribes. And so, in December of last year, I did, I finally did.

It was the questions about Branko Kingdom that drew the poison out of me, sucked it right out through a metal straw. Branko Kingdom, the eye-opening new thing on the music scene, Branko Kingdom, the epically strange and controversial pop culture force, and wouldn't I like to weigh in on this phenomenon? I was asked, as a musical purist, what was *my* take on this man who had seemingly invented his own genre, which had come to be known as "doomsday folk," and who was beginning to both enthrall and perturb millions with his twisted approach to tired aspects of the concert experience? I said, *Yeah, I have a take on Branko Kingdom.* And I gave it, and all hell broke loose.

You have to understand, it wasn't the bad music that enraged me about this man, though make no mistake, the music *was* bad, this overproduced gumbo of influences ranging from lesser Harpeth Rising to lesser Iron Maiden, with lyrics sporting the emotional maturity of Vanilla Ice. It was the ceaseless and empty posturing, the elevation of glam rock visuals to something that took itself so seriously. Branko Kingdom's shtick was to come on stage in costumes meant to shock and disturb; nightly he would vanish into the depths of some oversized getup borne from the worst nightmares of Goya or Beksiński, and from those getups he would often just never emerge as he worked his way through his jangly set list of adolescent death fantasies that would suddenly sprout Spanish guitar or flute solos. *Look at me*, he seemed to be saying to the world, *look how I dare to mix the beautiful with the repellent, the pastoral with the satanic, the classical with the digital! And wonder at how I refuse to show you my face unless I'm moved by the music and the moment to spontaneously do so!* 'Will he or won't he?' was the game at his live shows. Fans in Cincinnati would pour onto social media with their hearts broken that he never took off his tundra wolf mask once in two and a half hours, while doomsday folk nuts in Tampa would post videos of his big reveal and the moment the arena exploded in excitement because he had decided to expose his actual head.

But his celebration of these garish getups didn't end there; no, he would tease them in an especially delicious little way. He would walk the streets of whatever city his tour had come to next in costume, late at night, eighteen hours before the upcoming show, and his growing legions staked out alleyways and train tracks and slummy industrial areas where he would appear seemingly out of nowhere, always the ugliest and most abandoned parts of town, and they would deluge Facebook and Instagram with photos snapped as he moved silently and alone in his giant, horrific outfits, looking like a Chinese dragon or a minotaur with a ten-foot tail or maybe a gray alien with dripping jaws, whatever his designers had cooked up. It was understood, you see, it was part of the grand game that no one should approach, that would ruin the theater of it all; the fans of Branko Kingdom understood and embraced the behavioral code of his street roamings, oh yes. After fifteen minutes of being first spotted, he would disappear into the back of a van and ride off to distant applause and ever more acclaim for tearing down the fourth wall in new and compelling ways. When he was on camera, the man would talk about his costume choices and the incoherent mythologies he thought they represented, speaking very slowly and with oddly placed pauses between his adjectives and their nouns, so he *must* have been a genius, right?

But then there was the juiciest part of the Branko Kingdom myth: the criminal past, and his celebration of it. Not just some misadventures in youthful thuggishness, mind you, but an actual murder charge in his home country of Wales, dropped by prosecutors for lack of evidence, and one assault and battery rap that truly stuck, sending him to prison for eighteen months, a sentence that ended just before a tiny deal with Swear Jar Records brought him permanently to America and helped turn him into the swaggering atrocity he quickly became, energizing disaffected hipsters who got turned on by the persona of a man who claimed he was fascinated by acts of violence and had decided, *decided* mind you, to channel that fascination into his art... for now.

Yeah, let me say this about Mr. Kingdom, I told the writer from Rolling Stone. If this man represents even a tiny sliver of popular culture and the musical world, allow me to quietly remove myself from this ludicrous society now. I can only take so many brand puppets trying to bury their lack of skill under special effects and personality stunts.

Are you genuinely angry, the writer asked, that Kingdom covertly sampled your second biggest hit song for his first U.S. album, and that you weren't able to legally stop him? *Yes, I am*, I said. Apparently he had decided that the minuscule profit cut he had to sacrifice from the first fifty

thousand units of that album in order to assault and bastardize my band's work absolved him of the decency to ask permission or apologize afterwards, so yes, I was angry.

And I went on from there. The interview that went online a week and a half after I gave it was seventy paragraphs long, and seven of them were my teardown of Branko Kingdom. I asked for neither clarifications nor edits nor corrections. I called him a musical fraud and an immature goon for his glorification of violence. It wasn't the first time I'd trashed a fellow musician. I had a bit of a reputation for it, you see; otherwise *Rolling Stone* probably would never even have bothered with a fading dinosaur like me.

The difference here was, I hadn't vented like that to a journalist in years, and the world was now a very different place. I was now prey to the tyranny of thumbs, likes, and shares. Social media blew up, with other artists asked to take sides in this debate. My interview was seen as a litmus test of how one felt about popular music itself. I was the only one in the band who had no meaningful interaction with the online community, but Liz, Lenny, and our spacey drummer Ozzie Bunch came under immediate assault in their various feeds—what a perfect word for them, *feeds*. They were either celebrated as allies of an outspoken guardian of musical integrity or harassed by Branko Kingdom's zombie defenders for an apology. Lines were drawn. Further statements were demanded. More interviews were requested. I turned them all down.

Branko Kingdom, clever lad, at first never said a word, referring to the interview on Twitter only as "sustenance for my many thoughts." I think he carefully observed how poorly I was coming off out there in the digital octagon, and so he let his fans do all the dirty work of posting insults and threats. They made videos of our band's last album being burned and they slapped together montages of still photos making all of us look old, tired, and past it, complete with bar graphs depicting the decline of our record sales compared to the ascent of their hero's.

Liz, Lenny, and Oz were not happy with me for creating this distraction. *There is no distraction*, I told them. *Just stop looking at Facebook. Stop reading Google News when you're standing in line at Trader Joe's. Think of Christmas and cider doughnuts and kittens at play.* But it felt like the beginning of the end for us. They'd borne my scathing talk about other bands for years, and there had been arguments, yes, but this was different. Playing poison is a very dangerous game these days.

Naturally, a couple of weeks after the interview was posted, people just moved on. There was always new prey for the masses to feed on as the great conformity experiment that was social media slouched on and the 24/7 news cycle caught some actor cheating on his wife with his assistant. But there was suddenly more and more question my use of a certain term in the *Rolling Stone* interview, a term that wasn't thought much in favor in the year 2022, prone as I was to using somewhat antiquated terminology. Was it possible, just possible, that my use of this one term hinted at an insult directed toward Branko Kingdom's national origin? Had I perhaps intended to slander the very circumstances of his birth? Suddenly all my past interviews from assorted online archives were dissected and reinterpreted as keyboard warriors looked for a way to label me with the suffix -ist or -phobe.

Sensing blood in the bay, the news outlets jumped on the chance to generate more clickbait. Yes, they decided, what I had said was not simply a passing insult directed at an individual, but a bullying manifesto against an entire people, and for this, yes, now, *now*, I must stand up, I must address this situation and I must ask for forgiveness. I must come clean about what I was. It was decided that my soul had been exposed, and that soul was a dark and tainted thing that had

essentially, in so many words, maybe not *literally* of course, but *symbolically* encouraged the oppression of an entire class of human beings. I was on the list now.

It was at that moment that Branko Kingdom decided to officially speak out. I had indeed insulted him deeply, he told Vulture.com, and I needed to personally apologize—not just to him, but to the people of his home country, for they especially did not deserve my words of hate. He reissued his call for my servitude on Facebook and Instagram, and when that servitude did not immediately come, he took to TikTok and YouTube, demanding again that I come out of hiding to say I was sorry, sorry for everything: for insulting his talent, his showmanship, his heritage.

But I wouldn't do it, even after people from our record label tried to arrange a conference call with me about the situation, even after Lenny Stern took me aside and told me that his teenaged daughter was catching flack about all this at school. *Give it another week*, I told him. *Let all the overstimulated keyboard tribes keep fuming online; let Paul Jardyl in Marketing at the label worry himself into a frenzy over what it might do to the ticket sales on the western leg of the upcoming tour; everyone will burn themselves out when something juicier comes along.*

Funny thing. Even as the storm did progressively once again die down as the world realized no supplication was forthcoming, and that I wasn't especially bothered by its hyperventilations, Branko Kingdom himself kept at me. He issued a cryptic tweet in mid-January, consisting of just eight words:

JRS, you're running out of chances to atone

With no apostrophe in *you're*... and no period at the end of the sentence, which made it hang there, suspended. He couldn't tag me or at-reply me or whatever you call it, but it was obvious who he was talking to. He made a subsequent remark to someone at BuzzFeed that I had crossed a line that would not be forgotten. He was not a man who bore insults well, he said, sitting on a cinder block at some construction site somewhere on the east coast; he probably thought it made him look tough, there in his tasseled leather jacket that flowed down past his boots, and his temporary cheek tattoo showing an eel.

After that video eeled its way into the public, I issued what I thought would be my final statement on the matter to a friend of mine at *The New Yorker*. It was supposed to be off the record, but then I said, you know what, go ahead and print it, none of the troglodytes who listen to Branko Kingdom's screeching read Talk of the Town. I said to him, *The day that convicted felon teaches me about lines that shouldn't be crossed, I'll eat his guitar tuner—it's not like he understands how to use it anyway*. Considering him out of my life from that moment on, I turned my attention back to rehearsing with the band for our American tour of clubs and smaller venues that would start in February.

A week after that declaration, I got a call on my cell just before ten p.m. I'd just had a fairly unsuccessful date with a performance artist and was not in the greatest mood. I was cobbling together a nice Brunswick stew to throw myself a little late night pity party in my kitchen when the call came. I actually did recognize the voice on the other end of the line, but pride would have kept me from tipping my hand even if the confusion of how this man had gotten my cell number hadn't thrown me for a loop that left me temporarily speechless.

What do you want? I asked him, and he said, simply, in a Welsh accent much thicker than he normally seemed to produce for his ever-so-profound public musings: *An apology.*

There were so many insulting things I wanted to say to him in that moment that I mentally choked on all of them, and instead I just waited, waited. *Things could get very bad for you*, Branko Kingdom told me. He said he obeyed his own laws, not anyone else's. So there it was. A direct threat maybe, as hollow as his stage act, probably. By the time he said this I'd already made two full revolutions around my living room in the dark, geared up, completely tense, rubbing my temple, trying to summon the perfect dagger to slide into him. *Shall I start recording this conversation*, I asked him, *so you can explain each line in court someday?*

You're not afraid yet, he said, *but you will be*. He informed me that he was much, much stranger than anyone suspected. *Oh yeah*, I said? *How strange?* Ask Finley Hughes, he said, dropping a name I only kind-of sort-of knew.

Never in my life had I had such a surreal, mindbendingly ridiculous conversation, including the request for a theme song from the producers of a Mormon sitcom. But Kingdom was eerily lucid in his final thoughts before hanging up on me. He told me that I had one week to come to his home personally with an apology, or the next steps would be taken. I'll never forgive myself for my weak rebuttal, which amounted to nothing more than an invitation to my contemporary to get back in the trash can from whence he crawled and die there.

My grandfather, he said, *beat it into me that we were never to be demeaned. I have generations to protect*. He sounded so weirdly sincere that I calmed myself to ask him, why *me* for this disproportionate response to a magazine interview; I sure as hell wasn't the first one to criticize him in print, to his face, whichever. Why me? *It's not always completely my choice*, he said, and then he was gone.

I went over every single thing, every word he said, again and again as I sat in the dark, my food in the kitchen forgotten. There was no other way to interpret things: He had threatened me, and he clearly didn't care what I might say to anyone else about it. His confidence shook me. I finally fell asleep at a little past three.

The next day, Liz and I had to meet with a promoter and a stage designer about tour logistics, two hours of the usual scheduling and spec headaches. Afterwards, standing on Ventura Boulevard, I told her what had happened the night before, trying to put a darkly comedic spin on it, but as I described the conversation it felt more and more forced. Several times she asked me for clarifications and exact verbiage. She took me for coffee at Peet's because she wanted to talk to me about this situation very seriously.

She'd known me long enough not to try to push me into offering some half-hearted olive branch to my tormentor. She realized that things had progressed beyond that. As we sat there with our lattes, she tried to appeal more to fear. Because of once having once suffered through one of the scariest stalking situations I'd ever heard of, when she was just thirteen no less, Liz had read a lot about human behavior over the years. She'd been studying Branko Kingdom a bit, she told me: his lyrics, his messages on social media, his inane poetry. She thought all the theater around his persona was hiding something genuinely disturbing. *What are you doing for the rest of the day?* she asked me. When I said I thought we'd agreed to start reworking some tracks for next year's reissue of the first

record we ever did together, she said *No, you're going to read today. You're going to find a copy of the book about the Finley Hughes case.*

Kingdom mentioned him, I said, who is that again?

That, said Liz, is the name of the man who some people think he murdered. It had been written before Branko Kingdom became anyone but a fringe club act in the U.K., so it hadn't been tainted by perceptions of him as a celebrity. *The book still sucks, Liz said, but before you open your mouth one more time about him, or take another call from him, there's stuff in there you need to know, stuff you can't Wikipedia.*

Just telling Liz I would consider it wasn't nearly enough. *Get in my car, she said, we're going to The Iliad right now. You're going to do this for me—no, for your own good.* She was not in a trifling mood, I saw. And so we went book shopping, not talking much. I was too tired to argue. I would buy this book, all right, but I'd make sure to buy three others, mostly science fiction novels, so it wouldn't seem like I was caving. I did leave The Iliad with a used copy of a mass market paperback called *The Corpse in the Leather Chair* put out by a French publisher I'd never heard of.

On the way back to Studio City, Liz was eyeing her phone in the caddy on the dash at the stoplight at Ventura and Colfax and I heard her say, *Uh oh.* She pulled out of traffic and over to the curb, and she idled the car while she investigated a text message. She clicked on a link she'd been sent, and after a few seconds she handed the phone to me, looking disgusted. *Here, you deal with it,* she said, very coldly, and confused, I took the phone and looked at what she was seeing.

She'd clicked on a YouTube video dated that morning, concert footage from San Francisco where Branko Kingdom had taken the stage at the Fillmore, apparently just one hour before he'd made his phone call to me—which I figured out later meant he must have called me during the twenty-minute intermission in the show. The name of the video, complete with the typical inaccurate capitalization of a young fan, was BRANKO KINGDOM CALLS OUT JOHN ROSS SIMON ONSTAGE. Kingdom was standing at the microphone in near darkness, mostly silhouetted from behind by a sickly orange glow that made it difficult for the cellphone lens to focus. His backup band was silent behind him, staring out over the crowd. Kingdom's hair was shorn very close around his head and he seemed almost bald. He had a thin beard, prematurely flecked with gray. He was wearing a suit of medieval armor with eyes painted all over it. The camera zoomed in way too tight on this face, then zoomed back out more rationally, but the image stayed shaky.

This song goes out to the abuser John Simon, he said into the microphone, spurring a predictable reaction. His present legions began to holler and jeer. *It's a song of mourning,* he added, drawing an even louder reaction. *Listen well.* There was a long still moment of preparation, the kind that can be sort of riveting when you're at a concert and you know something's about to happen but it hasn't yet, and for a second you're just there with both yourself and the stage in almost total darkness, and that stage might as well be someone's garage somewhere, odd clankings and shiftings portending an imminent explosion of energy. The band kicked in and Kingdom joined them on guitar, playing a slow, echoing song with the voices of a ghostly woman's chorale in the background—he liked that technique, used it to death. I shut it off after about two minutes. The lyrics seemed to be about a soldier who continued to fight in some unnamed war long after he realized he was dead.

I gave the phone back to Liz. By then there were seven new messages on my own phone about Branko Kingdom. Four of them I could ignore, but three obligated me to text back and say *Yes, I'm fine, no I don't feel threatened, no, I'm not doing or saying anything.*

Fog the next morning, actual fog rolling off the Pacific. It was one of the band's last official practices before the tour and we were meeting in a grungy warehouse in Venice no one really knew about, nice and private, stuck on the edge of an industrial block in a building bordering a muddy yacht graveyard. That fog, so rare in L.A., seeped in over it, shawling everything in a gentle gray gauze that was partially due to smog, of course.

We got going real early; none of us stayed out late anymore. The mood was cordial but a little tense. The issue with Kingdom wasn't brought up. Liz didn't quiz me on my reading, which of course I hadn't gotten to the afternoon or night before. We focused on actually trying to lengthen a song people had never seemed to like, unable to give up the fight with it after nine years. Lenny, I remember, who was usually pretty chipper, was unusually tense, maybe because of a divorce court date he had coming up.

The warehouse, which used to be owned by Mattel I think, had this old wide loading bay door, and at about ten, just as I was heading back from the bathroom to our big soundproofed interior cave, there was the sound of someone knocking on it. Ozzie emerged, dressed in sweatpants and bare feet, and shuffled over to it. No one was supposed to be anywhere near the place, really. It was a ghost town there, nothing but pothole-ridden alleys between run-down buildings. Instead of just opening the side entrance out onto the alley, Ozzie actually unlatched the chain on the bay door and pulled on it hand over hand to raise it, one of those shaky corrugated deals. He was smiling, playing at warehouse work, a skinny hippie with no more upper body strength than a meerkat. Gray daylight spilled in.

There was a very small young woman standing outside. Big puffy, frizzy blonde hair, very pale. A flowered dress, pink roses. She tilted her head kind of quizzically at Ozzie, and then she saw me standing nearby and I was where her focus went then. Liz asked her if she was looking for something or someone, and the woman—she was maybe twenty—ignored her and she said to me, very gently: *We just want to know, why are you so filled with hate?*

I stepped forward and was about to say something when I noticed the woman wasn't really alone. There were other people standing about twenty or thirty feet behind her, softened by that fog, standing like a jury.

Lenny stepped up beside me, and so did Liz. I crossed the threshold, my head just clearing the corrugated door, and stepped out into the open air. My bandmates followed, all of us silent. We could see everyone now, everyone this girl was talking about. There were a dozen people outside on the cracked pavement, some of them with their backs against the rusting chain link fence separating the area from the boatyard beyond. All of them in their twenties, I think. Just watching, waiting. There was no sign of any cars that might have brought them. They must have walked from... who knows where, through the unnamed streets and alleys of the industrial park.

Liz started to say something about how this was a closed practice and we really needed our privacy, her tone cold but polite, but I rudely stepped on her words. *Oh yeah, is that what you're wondering?* I said to the girl. *Did your idol send you? Mom and Dad let you all out after chores this morning?*

Ozzie urged me quietly to let it go, but I actually stepped further out, toward a loose semi-circle a few of the bolder ones had created. Lenny followed protectively. Liz was the last one to actually emerge fully into the light fog.

Some guy off to my left with dark red hair, wearing a straw hat and a t-shirt with Rod Serling on it, said *We're not violent. We just want you to look at yourself in the mirror.*

I think I just kept saying *I don't believe this, I don't believe this*, and then Liz's hand was on my shoulder, just firm enough to let me know I shouldn't keep moving around, that was far enough.

All of you, I said, looking right at the girl, *all of you have one minute to get out of here*. But even as I said that, something was happening, something was happening between Lenny and a guy who had approached him and said the wrong thing. This guy, this kid, twenty-five years younger and about fifty pounds lighter, had come out with just three or four syllables, some kind of threat or challenge, and Lenny took one step forward and gave him such a powerful push backwards right at chest level that the kid fell backwards and went right down on his tailbone, nice and neat. That sent a few others forward and Ozzie shouted some word of intervention and Liz had me by the collar of my shirt, hauling me backwards, almost making me lose my balance. Suddenly the soft-spoken girl who had sounded like the Little freaking Mermaid when she'd first appeared was hurling insults at us so intensely she was bending over at the waist, her face going beet red, and her friends were doing the same and it got very loud. I heard the loading bay door working again and the band was retreating. None of the freaks out there dared come in. They stood and hollered and sheltered their fallen comrade, who was slow getting up, staring lightning bolts in Lenny's direction. Lenny wasn't flinching.

The bay door connected with the cement and there were random kicks and poundings against it from outside, but they clearly didn't really want to come in. They didn't have the guts for a real physical confrontation. As their empty clamoring and shouting faded, Liz finally risked opening the side door and looked out. I joined her. The gang was moving away down the alley, disappearing into the fog. A middle finger was offered by one woman, and there was a last-ditch threatening glower by some bearded guy beside her.

And there, most strikingly, standing still as the others retreated past her, was a woman whose image was impossible to forget. She had to have been well over six feet tall, straight black hair completely unstyled, no makeup. She wore a gray raincoat. We made eye contact. I think that was all she wanted, and then she turned and walked off well behind the others, almost like she wasn't a part of their mass. It seemed impossible that I hadn't noticed her before, and I wondered exactly when she had arrived. Liz saw her too, that I know. With this tall stranger's disappearance, the episode felt at an end.

Inside the warehouse, we were all completely quiet for a moment, and then Liz unleashed on Lenny, asking what he could possibly have been thinking, did he understand that the police could be here in ten minutes, had he really just *hit* someone? He just kept nodding, not saying anything, knowing he'd stepped completely out of line. When Liz turned to me, I said we weren't going to be discussing anything right now, that we had work to do and if we were adults we would get right back to it. I saw out of the corner of my eye Ozzie fastening the lock on the chain, very subtly, before walking back to his drum kit. We all morosely got espresso from the Breville machine our producer had set up in the corner the night before, a little surprise pick-me-up he'd left with a note. *All right*, I could almost hear Liz thinking, *we'll do it your way today*.

We were back in our cave and had our instruments in hand ten minutes after the confrontation. I recall a scene years ago when we'd seen the news of some horrible school disaster on TV, one that gave me nightmares for weeks, something where some sinkhole swallowed up a soccer team, and we'd done the same thing, just got right back to rehearsing, to forget, to have work to focus on and dig us out.

Something inexplicable happened when I began to play my guitar. Not only was I not amplified at all, which would have been relatively easy to explain, but my strings, I realized quickly, weren't producing any sound whatsoever. Nothing, not even limp acoustic mud. I checked my plug-in; it seemed fine. I disconnected it entirely and strummed again and again. Virtual silence. It was like the strings of my guitar were made not of steel and nickel but some lifeless material that was imitating wet rope. I picked hard at them, swiped my hand across them with real violence, but there was nothing but the sound of skin connecting with—what else do I compare it to? Balsa wood, rubber. I ran my fingers up and down the strings' length, feeling them carefully, strumming again and again.

Liz came over, frowning, checking my cord for herself and then touching the strings as well, expecting some kind of practical joke maybe. *Must be some kind of...* she said, but then just trailed off. I heard Ozzie say *What the holy hell?* And then, all at once, the sound of an amplified C-chord filled the cave as connectivity and life returned in an instant. My strings were back to normal. Lenny had never moved. He only perched on the edge of his wooden stool, staring at my guitar like it was some sort of creature he'd never seen before.

We got past it. We rehearsed. The first two hours after the confrontation outside we were bollocks, out of sync and uninspired. We were all waiting for that knock at the door that meant the police were here wanting to talk to Lenny, modest and loveable Lenny who the fans always liked more than anyone. I can only imagine what an arrest would have done to us on that day. But the knock didn't come by noon, or three, or six when we finally broke for the day, feeling almost good about our progress. Whatever the tension level among us, not one word had been exchanged about anything but music all day, even when food was delivered.

Pros, that's what my bandmates were, whatever flaws we may have had. Professional craftspeople. I was often proud of them not because of their talent but because they were so dedicated to getting it done. It was only when night fell that the stress really came back for me. For them too, I'm sure. I figured somewhere out there in the dark, the fans of Branko Kingdom were probably swapping posts about the events of that day, but it seemed like what happened at the warehouse never did leak. That seemed... strange. Like we'd somehow entered into a different phase of the conflict. Something even more unsettling.

His birth name was Brogan King, I learned from the first chapters of *The Corpse in the Leather Chair* by Pascal Prangere, and his childhood was marked by suffocating poverty and an itinerant existence, a sad curse visited upon the entire family tree dating back to the 1800s. His father Kinnith was a leather crafter and a gambling addict, and he drove his son all over western Europe chasing both legitimate work and ever darker activities that brought him into the fringes of the criminal underworld, but he never made enough in either realm, legal or illegal, to support a son on his own. Brogan's mother had died of tuberculosis just a year after giving birth to him. The boy was in and out of schools, mostly out of them.

A great revenge plan man, was Kinnith King. Perceived slights and cheats were pursued and pursued, inevitably resulting in a bar fight or assault charge. He'd do six or seven days in jail, then head out again, ready to gamble away whatever money he had in his pocket. He liked to fix rugby matches.

When Brogan was twelve and living temporarily in Glasgow, his father disappeared from visiting his own father, Lewis King, in prison three days before that man's release after four years for a third-degree homicide. Lewis was sixty-one then. Rather than go about the absurd and doomed theater of trying to legally adopt Brogan, he simply took him and ran.

Kinnith's disappearance was very suspicious, of course. There had been a lot of strife between him and his father over the decades. The causes of their conflict were murky. Nothing was ever truly written down about these people, and there was very little surviving oral history, no actual living relatives for Pascal Prangere to speak to. But once in a while, the book noted, someone would hear one of the men speak the name Oona. Oona was a name exchanged between Kinnith and Lewis King seemingly only in whispers and insinuations. The references suggested that Oona was a child, but this child's relation to either one of them was cryptic and undocumented.

Lewis King's body was found at the bottom of an elevator shaft in a tenement in Cardiff after three and a half years of criss-crossing Europe with his grandson illegally, during which time Brogan spent not a single day in school. He was put to work, in horse stalls and car washes and on a food truck where a grease fire nearly took three of the fingers on his left hand. His grandfather sometimes worked alongside him, both of them living under assumed identities. Lewis King's end came while drunk and stumbling around in a dark hallway barely dressed.

It was weeks before anyone could positively identify the corpse, even though, at the moment of his death from a broken neck, he carried in his wallet a photograph of himself with a young boy. No one in the tenement recognized either Lewis or the boy in the photo; he and Brogan had been living there illegally and kept to themselves. While the two were eventually identified by the police, there was also the question of why the old man had been clasping strands of black hair in his right fist when he was found face down at the bottom of the elevator shaft. Police didn't pursue the mystery with any particular vigor.

Brogan vanished once again. His years from sixteen to twenty-one were spent in a continuation of that wandering existence, living hand to mouth, playing guitar on the street, starting to write folk songs and play small clubs, transitioning quickly to a more metal sound in Colwyn Bay and then Wrexham.

The criminal court case that Pascal Prangere focused on in his book had to do with the death of a skeezy concert promoter in Cardiff who had clearly swindled Branko Kingdom, as he began to call himself in 2004, out of eight hundred pounds over the course of two years. Branko, always solitary and nomadic but known for disturbing fits and rages, had spoken openly about killing the man. And then, one morning, police entered the promoter's filthy efficiency apartment after no one could contact him for days. They found Finley Hughes sitting upright in a leather chair, dead. The condition of the corpse was so aberrant, so dreadful, that an observant medical examiner ordered an evacuation of the room where the body was brought until a Geiger counter could be brought in. Hughes bore the baffling but almost unmistakable signs of severe radiation poisoning: multiple skin burns and lesions, necrosis of the flesh, even increased fluid pressure in the cranial vault and destruction of the bone marrow.

But that wasn't what was going on. There was no radiation. No one *knew* what was going on. Nor did they understand it when the unnatural decay ceased almost two weeks after Hughes was found. The book documenting his condition did not spare the reader from two black-and-white photographs testifying to its ghastliness.

Prosecutors had some evidence of Branko Kingdom's intent to kill Hughes from his conversations and even notes he'd written to himself, and a poem no less referring to it, but realistically not enough to go to trial with. The physical evidence was completely inconsistent with an outside force, and a definitive cause of death simply couldn't be determined. One set of unusual fingerprints was found inside the apartment and on Hughes's clothing, but the molecular signature was indistinct. The author of *The Corpse in the Leather Chair* portrayed the case as being mostly about how the science of death could confound even the most educated experts. There were fascinating parts in the book about the investigations into everything from the medical treatments Hughes had endured as a boy to the materials that had been used to build his apartment. Nothing held any answers.

In the end, a revoltingly smug Branko Kingdom walked away free. His musical career in western Europe began to flourish, and soon he came to America, technically a felon because of his conviction and jail stint for beating the frontman of a punk rock group in an alley before a crowd of onlookers back in Wales.

The way I felt when I closed the book Liz had made me buy is, I suppose, only half what she'd wanted me to feel. What I came away with mostly was the portrait of a young man whose awful upbringing had hardened him in ways there was no coming back from. But I also hated him even more somehow. The things he'd been quoted as saying in the book and over the ensuing years suggested he truly enjoyed playing cynical mind games, enjoyed watching other people cower and setting them against each other; he drew power from it. Like Pascal Prangere, I was certainly not convinced that the death of Finley Hughes was murder. There was just no evidence of that, and the conflict between the two lowlifes didn't seem to rise to that level. Kingdom was a thug, yeah. But the world was full of them. The world, in, fact, embraced them. I hadn't lived fifty years, suffered all the usual slings and arrows and had to hold fast against untold record industry vampires to bow down to just *one* self-obsessed cretin. *The Corpse in the Leather Chair* went into my library donations box before the urge to flip back through it one more time possessed me.

Liz made one last attempt to set me straight the day after my address was leaked online by some of Branko Kingdom's fans. I wasn't home when it happened. My sub-lease of a small place near Griffith Park was up and I was staying for a couple of weeks at Liz's little house on Hope Ranch Beach, which she hadn't even seen for a year. She'd bought it for her retirement someday, and it was always made available to anyone in the band or our friends or relatives who were visiting. Here came word of people going to the house I'd been living in, driving past and yelling things, honking, stuffing cruel letters in the mailbox, even creeping up to the front windows and peering in. Kingdom did nothing to dissuade these freaks from doing it. Neighbors called the police and were good enough to run someone off when it seemed necessary. The more cynical people I knew swore up and down that it had been Kingdom himself who'd leaked the address.

No, Liz told me upon surprising me with an appearance at the beach house on a chilly Friday afternoon. *No, he'd admit it if he'd done that*, she said. I'd been doing a little composing on my Mac when she showed up. We sat out on the back deck, bundled up a bit, looking out over the moors-like expanse of the back of the property, which led to a private stretch of beach, and then the Pacific.

She'd bought me a new tea kettle from Sur La Table, a peace offering I suppose, making sure it was in what everyone knew was my favorite color, bright green.

She'd been having dreams, she said. It happened a lot when she got stressed and began to worry for the people in her life. In one of them, she was walking through a castle, and she could hear sounds coming from a dungeon somewhere, sounds of screaming. She went into a room and someone she knew was Branko Kingdom was standing there, and he was costumed, like he'd be in concert. He was a tin soldier, as if he were appearing in *The Nutcracker*. Bright blue coat, red vest, tall sable hat, boots. But he was holding a severed head in one hand, and there was nothing pretend about that. It dripped blood.

You know, you are a bully, Liz said to me. You think of it as being proud, stoic, whatever. A man of principle. Whatever feels like it puts you above the small-minded people. But you did insult him, and you did insult where he came from.

Don't think of it as apologizing, she said. Think of it as patching a flaw in yourself here and here, putting a little drywall on your own rough spots. Nobody wants to see you wind up alone. Some aging rock guy, keeps regretting what he says, keeps putting his foot in his mouth.

But I tell you, she was wrong. Regardless, I want everyone listening to know this: When I say something, that is *exactly* who I am. In a good mood, in a bad mood, angry, sad, sober, drunk, stoned, educated, uneducated. I ask for no erasure or reinterpretation, and I will never revise my record for *anyone*. You can all define John Ross Simon however you want, but I don't edit myself for you. Your shallow wounds you show to others for pity—*Look what he did to me, you say*—those wounds belong to *you*.

We talked more, Liz and I, but when it was clear she wasn't getting through to me and never would, she left—but first she did remind me of something I'd written myself back in 1998, lyrics on my first clumsy album. For a song called "Welcome to the City," I wrote: *Opinions and philosophies in an odious flow / God save us from the people who are sure that they know.*

What happened to the guy who wrote that? she asked me, the guy who had some doubt about things? Where'd he go?

The waves, coming in, rolling in. I wanted to take one last walk on the beach before the tour. I crossed the dwarf dunes behind the house and made lonely tracks in the sand as dusk came. Just a twinge of orange in the sky. No surfers today, no one else venturing out. The houses on the left and right were hundreds of yards down the beach.

I was about thirty yards from the shoreline when I became aware of a presence well behind me. God knows how I sensed it. I turned, expecting it to be Liz. Already I was regretting my tone with her, and I was at least ready to admit I had my doubts about the threat level posed by Branko Kingdom, who I thought just might challenge me physically at some point outside some club or on my doorstep, who the hell knew.

But it wasn't Liz. It was a woman in a gray raincoat and crimson sneakers. She was tall, so tall it was the very first thing that registered. Straight black hair stirred and whipped by the wind. It was the woman I'd see outside the warehouse in the fog.

She was walking towards me, expressionless. I could feel my face going red. My anger wasn't even waiting for words or introductions anymore. This was trespassing, and this woman would pay.

Her right hand was in her pocket, which made me nervous. When she got close enough she took from it a small card, an index card, and she was extending it to me even before she stopped before me in the sand. I will guess her height: six feet seven inches, based solely on my feeling from having watched more than a few NBA games almost courtside. Very flat features, no makeup. That hair came down almost to her waist.

I took the card. It had block handwriting on it. It said: I SACRIFICED THE ABILITY TO TALK. I AM BROGAN'S SISTER. I CAN HEAR.

So was it any wonder I didn't know at all what to say. My memory of that particular moment is so indistinct. I felt diminished by her towering height, the size of her hands, and her obvious physical strength. I must have said something, surely something confrontational, maybe insulting, because out came another index card, the kind you buy at Staples, one hundred for a buck, blue lines with a red one up top.

LAST CHANCE, the card said. COME TO THIS ADDRESS, 11 PM. I recognized the road the next letters described. It was out in the Valley.

It was my turn again. I offered that it was truly brave of Brogan to send his sister, if that's who she really was, to threaten me. There had been no mention of a verified sibling in Pascal Prangere's book, or in anything I'd ever read or known or heard about Kingdom.

I pushed this first set of cards into my own pocket. She produced yet another from hers.

It read: I AM THE ONE WHO MAKES STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN. OR I CAN MAKE IT STOP. Her lettering was memorable for the fact that each word was on a slightly different alternating horizontal plane, and the bars of her Es were way too long, like little reaching arms.

Make it stop? I asked her. I had to raise my voice now over the wind and the ocean. *Pray tell, what would it take to make you stop this? Because I would really like to know.*

For this, she had no perfect card. She held her right hand low in front of her just above waist level, as if she wanted to make sure no one saw what it was doing. And she rubbed her thumb and forefinger together in the unmistakable, universal symbol for money.

I threw back my head and laughed, for the first time in days, a sour thing that gave me no pleasure beyond maybe hurting her for an instant. Never did she lower her eyes or give any sign she cared. I told her I was calling the police and I turned away, walking close to the shoreline as I pulled my cellphone from my pocket. I steeled myself not to turn, no matter what, not give her the satisfaction of looking back. If she wanted to be arrested, that was her right as a citizen of our fine country.

I had started to dial when a tingling sensation started to wander up my left arm from my wrist, and the arm began to feel very, very warm. At the age of fifty, I had conditioned to think one thing: heart attack. There was no sense of pressure but almost immediately the warmth became real heat. I shoved my phone back in my pocket and clawed at my jacket, pulling the sleeve up. That was when the same sensation struck my right leg, starting at the foot. Within two seconds it felt like the leg had been wrapped in a hot compress.

There was a popping sound and my left jacket sleeve caught fire. I could smell the smoke as flames circled and squeezed everything below the elbow like a constricting snake. The flames I saw were the strangest I ever had or ever will see: completely green they were, the neon green color of a traffic light or the eyes of a woodland troll in a monster movie, green, not yellow, and by the time I realized this was all really happening the right leg of my jeans went up in flame, a bright green burst of heat and pain, and I screamed.

What a stunning palette I must have been, those flames against the dusk sky over the ocean as I spun and shrieked and beat at the fire. Through the upward curl of heat shimmer, I saw Branko Kingdom's sister striding toward me across the sand from ten yards away. She lunged with her arms forward and shoved me backwards into the surf with twice the strength that Lenny had used to shove one of Kingdom's minions. I flew several feet and crashed into the water on my side. Salt water rushed into my mouth and I spat it back up, my head pounding but the pain suddenly receding. The fires were quashed quickly. I managed to stabilize myself on my knees as the last of the smoke plumes drifted harmlessly before me. Through them I saw the woman who had saved me turn and walk away.

But she was not alone now. Her brother was waiting for her just up the beach. Dressed much like she was, but with the addition of a brown beret to protect his almost bald skull. He gave me a long look and turned to walk beside her. They did not walk toward Liz's house. They headed north, confident I wouldn't follow, and became black smudges in the growing dark.

I didn't feel safe or even stop gulping gratefully for air until after I'd staggered back to the house and torn off my wet clothes. After I'd had a hot shower and drank about a gallon of hot tea, I went through the pockets of my now-ruined coat and jeans, blackened by fire. Of the cards Branko Kingdom's sister had handed me on the beach, there was no sign—except for the one with the address and that warning of LAST CHANCE. The others must have come loose in the waves, I told myself. That must be what happened. But I couldn't even lie to myself that she'd been able to set me on fire from her position on the beach in that terrifying instant. Too far away, physically. Just not possible.

I started driving out toward Santa Clarita at quarter to nine. I made one stop on the way, in Oxnard, to pick up Dustin. Dustin had been head of security for two of the band's tours in the past but he was retired now, living alone with a cat. He had small gold-wire glasses, puffy pink cheeks, and a struggling combover that made him look like the financial adviser who'd slowly been losing all of Lenny's money for him for years, and Dustin was soft-spoken and almost old-world polite, but he'd worked for the CIA in Afghanistan for eleven years and was known to be completely hardcore when the situation called for it. He'd stare down Satan if he was hired to. We'd bonded a bit back in the day over a common fondness for bocce, and I didn't have much trouble convincing him to take some dough to just ride along with me to the Valley.

I explained the entire situation to him on the way, save for what happened on the beach. He nodded mechanically every three seconds, like he always did when someone relayed information to him, and he assured me I'd have no trouble if he brought me along. I never asked him what he might be carrying under his J.C. Penney sport coat.

We got to the house at five past eleven. Dustin navigated us there. The clarity of the lettering on the index card, now fully dried out, was still intact, but the address seemed to be a mistake. Not that the neighborhood wasn't as I remembered it, nestled in the hills, one house only every quarter mile or so. But the place I'd been directed to was dark, looked abandoned. An unmaintained Spanish Colonial, three stories high, unlit windows, overgrown lawn. Not a single car in the circular drive. I idled, getting more and more nervous, and hating myself for it.

Look there, Dustin said, and then I saw it too: The front door was ajar, and deep inside, there was a faint glow, like candlelight.

Dustin asked me if I was okay with this situation. I did what I figured was the smart thing: I dialed the number that Branko Kingdom had called me from on the night he'd first personally threatened me. It rang and rang. No answer. Dustin's eyes moved in subtle motions here and there to take in the property, always returning to that glow from within.

I hung up and made the decision that we'd just go in. *Theater*, I told Dustin. *Just empty theater*. Surely that's what this was.

I killed the engine and the lights and we got out into the cold. Winter in Los Angeles can be a real thing, you know? They never really show it in movies. But it's always made this Ohio boy plenty sad.

We walked across the front lawn and that candle glow became more pronounced. We were being drawn inside. Dustin tapped me very lightly on the shoulder to allow him to go in ahead of me, his hands loose at his sides. Up four stone steps past a big ceramic frog. Then inside.

There was a foyer with a high ceiling, and a mostly empty living room off to our left. The candlelight that had guided us came from a candelabra sitting atop a wooden table in the hallway.

Music was playing somewhere in this old house. God help me, I recognized it right away as Branko Kingdom's. I'd had to listen to his entire lousy library as research in part of our copyright action against him. Big speakers were somewhere up ahead. The volume was high enough to be irritating, but not high enough to attract the attention of the faraway neighbors.

More candlelight in the kitchen, which was spotless but again, unlive d in. No personal effects here of any kind, or anywhere else.

Outside, Dustin said when he spotted an open door at the edge of the kitchen. That was where the music was coming from. More light out there too. So we went. I guess I should have known what we'd walk into. I just wasn't thinking very clearly. Rage will do that.

The color of the light outside was a rich but artificial yellow, spreading out over a stone deck that stretched well out onto the expansive back lawn. The borders of the deck surrounded a swimming pool with no water in it. The area had been professionally lit with a couple of umbrella studio lights on tall stands. They must have been still dark when Dustin and I had pulled up.

Someone or something was standing in the deep end of the empty swimming pool, facing away from us. Waiting under the stars in that Hollywood luminescence augmented by a pair of fire sconces whose small flames danced and shook freely. A man in costume. Grossly oversized. A black cloak that hid the entire body flowed over the feet. The headpiece was huge.

I stepped toward the edge of the pool as the music thrumming through some nearby speakers segued into a different Branko Kingdom deep cut. Off to the left of the pool, a guy with a ponytail in a white t-shirt was calmly working some computer equipment set up on a rolling cart, a tangle of cords and cables running all the way back into the house. Two high-end video cameras were set up on tripods, one looking toward one end of the pool, one looking toward the other. The tech guy poked a couple of keys on a laptop, and the camera views were suddenly rearranged on a small flat-screen monitor before him. He knew I was there, but he paid me no attention.

In the pool, the man-thing began to turn. Like its head, its hands were enormous, lumpy and pasty white, just three fingers on each hand. The head featured an almost flattened nose and a grotesquely wide mouth that was nothing more than a dark slit, inhuman. Its big shiny eyes were crimson and completely vacant, no corneas or pupils. They stared both at me and beyond me. The thing in the pool looked like a crude papier maché demon with skin a thousand years old. The firelight made the skin glitter.

Branko Kingdom waited for me. The tech guy hit a few more buttons and the studio light that shone in my direction brightened just a bit and shifted just a few degrees.

I stepped to the very edge of the pool, hesitating before the three wide stairs which led down into the shallow end where Kingdom and his helper wanted me to go, for the most efficient camera angle. Dustin hung back.

I turned and looked at the video monitor. Yes, it was true: The live feed had begun on YouTube and God knew what else about eight minutes before, likely as soon as I pulled up to the curb.

Kingdom had no intention of speaking. He waited, spreading his bulbous creature arms. My breath plumed up prettily in the beam of the lights.

Was I prepared to give him what he wanted when I had first entered that house? I think I was. Because I *had* become scared. But when I saw I was to be paraded before the public, something else took over.

I guess I regret not thinking of something incredibly clever to say in that moment when Kingdom's viewing audience expected my apology to come. Instead I filled my lungs to max capacity and unleashed just two words—two words all of you are familiar with I'm sure, two words I'd yelled before in my day, God knows, but now they were loosed like the dogs of war, screamed with as much volume as I could bear, loud enough to wake anyone within a quarter mile, each syllable stretched and wrung out in ways I never thought were possible, my face going hot and feverish, spit flying out of my mouth, my fists clenched, eyes watering. Two feral, grotesquely elongated syllables, streamed live over the internet. I almost fell over with the force of them, so that Dustin had to come forward and stabilize me before gripping my shoulder much more firmly to pull me away as the Branko Kingdom-thing standing between the fire sconces in the pool remained completely motionless.

I shook myself free and strode ahead of Dustin back into the house, moving so fast he had to labor to keep up. We weren't impeded in any way. Back through the front door, back to the car, the music fading behind us. I gunned the engine and we got out of there. From the road I could now see the ambient yellow pollution from the studio lights beyond the house. For all I knew, the video feed was still going.

Dustin didn't say a word most of the way back to Oxnard, and when I was finally able to speak, I had nothing much to add. His assistance would no longer be required. We shook hands at his house and I went home without listening to or responding to any messages. Never even turned my phone on. The end had been set in motion. Nothing I could do but play it out.

February 15th, 2022. The band that took the stage at The Showbox in Seattle was not quite the same one that people had been expecting when tour tickets had gone on sale in the eighteen cities we were scheduled to play, but you know, things happen. Lenny was there on bass, as ever, always needing the money, and always able to compartmentalize our crises and plow through the worst parts of all of them. Talking issues through exhausted Lenny in general, and this to me had been a useful trait as we'd bulldozed through our remaining rehearsals. Ozzie was behind the drums. He'd been maybe the most sympathetic to me over the past weeks, but since 2019, his decision-making had been getting wobbly and unpredictable, mostly because of the drugs. Nothing heavy for Ozzie really, just booze and weed in fairly heavy quantities, but things had taken a darker turn after his back surgery and his trouble kicking any kind of pain meds. He wasn't quite the same person who'd replaced Tom Barker in 2012. He was quieter now, less excitable, less of a presence on stage, and seemed to enjoy and want less out of life each year.

It was Liz we lost. She left the band via an email to me, and I felt worse about that than her leaving; the leaving was understandable. Her course was fixed as soon as the video clip of me standing at the edge of Branko Kingdom's pool losing my mind got out everywhere. But to not even come to me after all those years and give it to me straight, in person... obviously that was a message in itself. The email was cordial, and it detailed every possible way she could help me and the band during the tour from afar. Liz made a phone call I know must have been difficult for her and got her ex, Mothusi Monamela, to take over on lead guitar, and the man was not only an absolute shredder but he knew the songs and he got how I worked quickly. He didn't talk much. That might normally bother me. But now it was fine. It wasn't totally clear when or if I'd ever see Liz again.

We'd sold out all our dates a little slower than the predicted schedule, but they did sell out, so maybe my pariah / hero / nutcase status had some brief box office value. Having forbidden anyone around me from talking to me about it, or about any new developments in the world of Branko Kingdom, I can honestly say I'm not sure what the world quite thought of me anymore. The vibe I was getting from our record label was that I was done. That was fine. This was my last tour with anyone, a fact I didn't feel the need to tell anybody yet.

8:20 p.m. We came out on stage to big applause and maybe, maybe a few boos somewhere from some loyalists who'd dared show up to be proxies for my archenemy. No introductory words from me that night; we just kicked right into "The Shadow I Followed Home," in a new, faster arrangement to offset the harsh lyrics more. And that thing happened that it's always so tough to explain, that thing where after the first few notes, our entire history as not just as a band but as human beings disappeared, and there was no past and no future, just electricity and action and feeling, and it felt like I was engulfed in both darkness and light at the same time. That feeling, it's why so many old rockers won't give up playing live ever, until they physically can't crimp their hands anymore or their voices simply fail. Playing very loud music on a stage before a sea of people was like being a blinding roman candle that burned for two hours straight. It was eternal youth.

The Showbox was a small place, only about two thousand seats, but that's the way I wanted it. In a place that size, you can notice little details of the crowd from the stage if you have the presence of mind to look between songs, swigging a bottle of water or saying a few scripted words into the mic. It was difficult not to notice, as I'd approached the mic, a bank of five adjacent empty seats right in the middle of the second row; I could see it even though everyone in the audience was still on their feet. Like a group of VIPs hadn't made it for the opening number. Those seats were three hundred dollars a pop.

We were a little over halfway through the song when I noticed that two of the seats, the ones at either end of the grouping, had become occupied. In the leftmost sat Branko Kingdom, spotted only in brief flashes when the energized bodies in the first row separated just enough to see. Kingdom wore a black baseball cap pulled down low, and a turtleneck sweater. Totally anonymous. In the rightmost seat was his sister, wearing the exact same clothes as I'd seen her in twice before. Even indoors, in a sweaty music hall, she wore that raincoat. If she hadn't been sitting down she would have caused a real sightline problem for the people behind her. Both of them looked... bored. If my bandmates spotted them too, I never saw.

Even when you're mildly stunned on stage, you play on because instinct and momentum have taken over. And what was I supposed to do? A seat at our concerts could be bought by anyone. After the song finished I would have a split-second word with the lead security guy, who was standing stage left, just out of sight.

You see, what I had done that made me a marked man was take away my enemy's power, even so briefly. He'd had none as he grew up; it had been kept from him by degenerates and criminals. For him, the music, the fame, the costumes to shift his identity this way and that, it was all about gaining power, coveting it, and holding onto it, and I had broken that hold, and that's what he couldn't bear. I understand that now.

About thirty seconds from the end of our opening number, something went sideways with the sound of Mothusi's lead guitar. A discordant note, then another. I turned, alarmed. He was collapsing to the stage, still holding his blue Stratocaster, as I sang these words:

*In the third house from the left sits my lonely little Dad,
Taught me it was good to be rich but better to be mad...
For years he's been living in the ashes of his pride,
Told the world 'I do not want you,' but he lied.*

Something was very wrong with Mothusi's body. It bent at an unnatural angle as he fell. His legs bowed out in opposite directions and he went down face first, his guitar trapped beneath him. His head seemed to bulge when it connected with the stage, and his every limb expanded as though he were made of jelly. The first of the screams came then, from the couple of rows closest to the stage. Mothusi rolled over, his face angled towards me. His head seemed like it had been smashed somehow. His eyes and his nose were too close together.

Ozzie had stopped drumming and immediately scrambled out from behind his drum kit. He got about three steps toward Mothusi when his eyes went wide. He raised his face to the ceiling high above and opened his mouth as if to yell in unimaginable pain. The veins in his neck bulged and changed color. Then he went down as well. With the music now stopped completely, and me being so close, I heard the sound vividly. I doubt anyone else could. Ozzie's body hitting the stage sounded like what I imagine a garbage bag filled with motor oil would. No solidity.

The look on Lenny's face was sad and plaintive as we made eye contact. His features appeared to melt as his bass fell from his hands and his tall frame sagged, slumped, and fell with a looseness of limbs that makes me think now of a marionette whose operator had suddenly cut its strings. His mouth had opened in a horrified O-shape and I saw that his teeth were gone, all of them. Just gone. Then the seemingly structureless bag of Lenny's fluids and organs hit the stage and like the others, he was dead.

In the second row of The Showbox, people were screaming and backing away in horror from the seats flanked by Branko Kingdom and his sister, who were content for the moment to take in the sights, quite still. Those middle three seats weren't empty anymore. Three human skeletons soaked with blood were propped up in them, empty eye sockets staring at the stage.

I unslung my guitar, dropped it onto the stage, and staggered forward to the edge of it as bedlam descended and people rushed for the exits or merely stood in shock in the aisles, not knowing what to do. Both Security and our tour manager had run out onto the stage and shortly, medical personnel would appear and frantically try to figure out what they were dealing with. I didn't look back again at the hollow sacks my bandmates had become. I looked forward instead, at their propped-up bones.

The crowd was pushing in both directions in the aisles. Some kind of announcement came over the PA; I don't know what it was. A woman from Security was trying to pull me toward her but I shook her loose and jumped down onto the main floor. Fans were coming up to me, reaching out, offering help, weeping, shouting. I pushed them all away.

Branko Kingdom and his sister had disappeared. I thought I saw Branko in the crowd, getting farther and farther away, and I shouted for him. But it really could have been anyone. His sister, who should have been easy to pick out in the chaos, was nowhere. The side exits had all been opened.

Already photographs were being taken of the gawking, lounging wet skeletons, and of course the stage itself, where my bandmates lay. Security didn't have the numbers to keep anyone from doing so. Panicked and mesmerized fans converged quickly on the bones, and some of them tried to keep me back from them. I got close enough to reach out to touch the skull of the one farthest on the left, that one in particular because the weird angle of its head and jaw made it seem like it was laughing at me. But hands and arms surrounded me and I was practically lifted off my feet as I whispered: *Lenny.*

Whatever shot they gave me fifteen minutes later to stop my wails of sorrow and fury erased most of what happened then. I went down into darkness and was kept there for a very long time.

It's April now, and I am in my right mind once again. Thinking very clearly. I've answered every question posed to me. My visitors have all had to come to me in person here in my dark little hideout in Montauk; no cell phone anymore. They don't know what to say. Liz, I can tell, is very worried about what I'm turning into now, but even she is without ideas about how to help me. I watch the gulls through the living room window for hours at a time, staying very quiet, very calm. Sometimes I'll make little notes on a pad of paper, ideas for poems. I'd like to do a book of poems someday.

Branko Kingdom disappeared after the concert at the Showbox. What else could he do? See, you can arrange to slowly kill a man with some kind of ghastly syndrome that feels like radiation poisoning is eating your very core; you can do that once in life and maybe get away with it, but you can't... you *can't rip the insides* from three human beings in public and not irrevocably shatter reality.

I have a theory if you want to hear it. I don't think Kingdom knew that his sister was going to do what she did to the band. Three simultaneous heart attacks maybe, that's what he expected to see, something like that, with me left alone to suffer and agonize over the guilt of what I had caused. I think even he was confused about why the three empty seats were there.

His sister, I believe, is actually beyond his control. She's the truly dangerous one, the one with the power to make things happen. Maybe there's no trust between them, maybe there's even strife. Branko *had* to vanish because what she did was so unthinkable that he would never stop being questioned, hounded, associated with that night.

Here's another thought for you: His costumes all along, I bet, okay, I bet they were so oversized because of an inadequacy thing—they were a subconscious attempt to match her physical stature. I'd be interested to know what Liz thinks of that.

His sister, she's the key. She's out there somewhere, and I know something about her that's going to help me strike back. She likes her money, yeah. If she can be bought, then I have the advantage now. If I haven't been struck dead yet by some bizarre wasting illness, or maybe another round of spontaneous combustion, more complete this time, maybe it means she'll be open to a deal. I'm sure I have more money put away than Branko, whose musical career just wasn't nearly as long as mine was, and now he'll have to bleed his savings to stay out of sight. I'm willing to give it all to her. Everything. I'm curious about what she could do to him with the right persuasion. It's got to be truly epic.

Next month, maybe the month after, I'm going to get back in touch with Dustin to see if he has any ideas about who we might contact to get a search going. My days are going to get busy, and at night I'm sure I'll keep dreaming of my archenemy's cloaked nighttime wanderings through slummy neighborhoods and industrial wastelands. Wherever he really is right now, he's never going to stop needing new and more elaborate disguises to evade me.

gifters

November 30th.

A man and his wife came into the office today at about ten. Naulus Ebbit and Nora Ebbit, originally from Virginia, later from Detroit. He said he had just bought the old house on Cherry Road at auction from a firm in Bloomington after it had gone past its claim date for relatives of Thomas Combs. What a price this man got for it, very astute on his part. He seems to know a lot about the area. He kept insisting I check out the deed papers he had brought as proof he was legitimate. He had all sorts of other papers too. I think he is one of these men who believes that documents mean order, and order is sacred.

Ebbit owns a grinding mill in Faribault. Small man, expensive suit, shiny glasses with gold rims, bald up top. Smiled a great deal, but there was not much natural about it. His wife is very quiet. They have no children. We talked mostly about where they would contract for the repairs that are so needed to the house. The boiler, for one thing.

I set the papers aside for Edith to transcribe when we get more ink and explained the well system to Mr. Ebbit, and how levies would be collected. He seemed surprised when I told him I was also the town manager. When he left I got curious and looked in the files to see when the last new person had come to Porto. Yes, it was Lyle Brennith, fourteen years ago. Naulus and Nora Ebbit bring the population now to an even eighty.

December 4th.

Talked to Brian Carpenter today for a while. When he brought the mail on Monday, I had given him Naulus Ebbit's original deed papers to deliver back to the Cherry Road house. Brian is getting so old now I almost hate to add any tasks to his route.

He had a story for me, but then he always does. It seems the Ebbits own a very big dog that they have trained to be a guard dog, and a real hellion it is. A new sort of German breed called a Doberman. Ebbit had mentioned it briefly because he saw the portrait of Sniffer on my office wall. Because of this Doberman (memory note: look up the spelling), Brian could not get close to the house. The dog was on a chain, but the chain was long enough to make the entire half acre around the house fair territory for its wrath, which Brian said was loud and rather wet. He stood calling from the road and finally Naulus Ebbit came out and brought the dog inside. Even then he would not come out to meet Brian. Instructions were shouted out to him to leave the papers on the stump I used to play Soldier's Advance on with the Risley kids.

Brian asked me what I knew about these people and I told him. I know he would like to gossip a bit to everyone in town, so I intentionally kept my observations to a minimum. I said to him, 'Maybe Ebbit doesn't like your eyepatch, maybe he thought you were a brigand.' He pulled on it and shifted it so that it covered his nose and we laughed.

It is his birthday today, so I surprised him with some shortcake that Christine baked for him. Little does he know that there is a dinner waiting for him at Temperance Hall tonight with a tenth of town in attendance.

This is the first time I have had the thought that it might be Brian's last birthday here. He moves painfully now. Soon he will need to move back to his people in Eagan and live out the rest of this days off his feet.

December 7th.

I took a walk over to Ms. Mathison's today to see if her back is better and if she is out of bed. Oh, it is going to be so cold this month, I can feel it. I liked the walk past the bean fields because it was so long and took me past a lot of old memories. I stopped to talk to Dan Hagen and see about his progress with the ghastly machine he bought in Minneapolis. I think he is losing hope that its engine will ever actually work, so I do not expect the sound of an automobile to curse the area any time soon. Bob Moses waved me into his shop and asked that I call a session of the council to discuss girding Trampier Road better against the weather, but I told him about the budget shortfall and he agreed to be patient until January, even though it might be too late to truly address the problem by then and another year will have to go by before that damned road stops assaulting every carriage wheel and healthy ankle in town. The engineer who passed through from Missouri in July told me we were facing a six hundred dollar series of repairs, and I still do not have the heart to tell Bob about that figure, or that I think the road is just not oft-traveled enough anymore to spend it. He is still living in a bygone time when the shoe factory was still open and we had four times as many people here as we do today.

At home, Christine made beef stew. Fell asleep early. Felt very cozy with the wind whipping up outside.

December 9th.

In the office early today to sort out the annual levies. Elizabeth Sherwood came in, downcast, fretful. She asked me if I had been past the new people's property recently, the Cherry Road people, and I told her no, had not seen Naulus Ebbit or his wife at all in town: not at church, not on Trampier Road.

'You have to come right now,' she said, and she explained the problem to me. I had her slow down and get real careful with the details. It did not seem possible. So we went.

Elizabeth did not talk much as we walked. I do not know where she gets the energy to move like she does, especially after nearly succumbing during the flu wave last year. I wonder if she could still beat me in a footrace like she did when I was in the fourth grade and she was the new teacher at school. I still smart about that sometimes.

Up we came to the Ebbits' house. The place will probably be a shambles for months, though the man obviously has money. The next big rainstorm will blow the shutters right off. The woodpile out back has gone to rot and needs to be cleared out.

We were not even fifty yards from the place when we could see the signs: one nailed to each of the two aspens in the front. Elizabeth and I stood and read them silently, she for the second time. The age on the paint struck me like these were signs Ebbit has had for a long time, and maybe he transported them from Detroit, or somewhere even before Detroit.

The signs make reference to the glory of the Circle of Frontier Guardians through the shorthand C.F.G., with a star beside it. They are a warning to trespassers, strongly worded in the way some men have that addresses a very particular type of person. It has been years since I saw signs like these, and certainly not anywhere near Porto. Not since passing through Minneapolis on our way to see Christine's mother and father.

Elizabeth said to me, 'What can you do about this?' But I was at a loss. The signs are squarely on Ebbit's property. The wording skates right up to the edge of threat, but people like him seem to be very practiced in knowing exactly how far they can go and what they can imply without breaking the law. We are lucky that the Weavers' two kids do not have to walk this way on their way to the school. I tried quickly to think of who else might have to, but then I figured there was a reason Ebbit probably wanted to live out here, past the bend, away from everyone.

I noticed a third sign bolted high up on the side of the house, facing east, as if Ebbit was afraid the kind of people he seems to hate might come marching over the hill from Hessian's Stream and attack him from the woods. I wonder just how aligned Mrs. Ebbit is with her husband in his apparent views, or if she has much say in the matter at all.

Elizabeth kept muttering, 'We are not going to have this, we are *not*.' She had only seen the signs because she was on Cherry Road meaning to collect different kinds of stones for class next Monday, so she can teach the kids about quartzite and greenstone and basalt and the like, just like she taught me. Same lesson, thirty-five years apart.

I feared Ebbit might come out of the house at that moment and I would not know what to say. I have to say I was also a little afraid of this dog Brian had talked about; he made it out to be such a monster. I turned Elizabeth's shoulders away from the house and brought her away from there. I was not up for challenging anyone just then. I need some time alone to think about this.

When Edith came in at three, she already knew about the signs. She had heard about them from Spalding Nordham. So there is no chance this will go away now. Elizabeth is right—we are not going to have this.

December 10th.

I slipped off to Faribault today at just past seven. Meeting with Corbin Nin about his estate plan. He wants to set up a trust for his son. Pierre the Second was a little confused about my presence in his stall that early but was agreeable enough. I need to get better shoes for him, but he is still prone to yearning for speed. I reined him in where I could, but in open land I let him gallop despite the pain it causes to my hip.

I caught Nin just as he was opening his shop for the day. I had already prepared every document for him, so all he had to do was review them and sign. Then I tried to get him talking a little. I hate to prey on people for information, but he does owe me a little for helping him *gratis* to smooth out his deal to buy Herman and Sons, and if ever there was a man on this earth who seems to know something about everyone, it is him. I do admire his head for business and for always seeming to know the way the wind is blowing. I just do not trust him personally. There is a coldness and a ruthlessness about business he has. So I have kept a distance, and sometimes I regret I was recommended to him.

We took chairs in the corner of the shop and he got up occasionally to assist someone. He said he absolutely knew the name Naulus Ebbit, and was surprised I did not. But I do not think someone like Corbin Nin will ever understand how we live in Porto.

He seemed more open to talk about Ebbit than any topic we had ever discussed. He had almost partnered with the man once on a cab service. The partnership had not gone well. Strong disagreement about the numbers. Ebbit had been maybe a little overfond of his education. The two had eventually parted ways. They were not friends.

Nin told me Ebbit had started quietly with his other ravings about ten years ago but had gotten louder and louder since. He had set himself up in Detroit and started in to anyone who would listen. He liked to talk about certain scientific proof he had discovered while travelling the world, proof of the inferiority of 'undesirables' plaguing our country. Wrote to the newspaper a lot about it. Could quote Monty Upchurch's hideous book from memory.

All this was hearsay, Nin told me, because he himself had never actually travelled in the same circles as Ebbit. But at some point, things had changed with the man. He was not content any longer to discuss inferiority by birth or give back-alley lectures on his dream of a better world where everyone looked and walked like him. He started writing to the newspaper about a 'conspiracy of mongrels'—cultural conspiracy, economic conspiracy, whatever. Started spreading the word that good folk were under attack and they had to fight back. And as soon as the tone changed toward that direction—about 'fighting back'—it was only a matter of time before the Circle of Frontier Guardians came calling.

At one point Nin got up to have a discussion with a tall thin man who had come in, and it was a discussion I obviously wasn't meant to hear, as Nin gave me a sidelong glance and guided his visitor off to a corner. I have never seen such an expensive-looking suit of clothes as this man wore. When Nin came back I had to remind him of where we were in the conversation and he seemed intent to wrap it up fast. I wonder about that clothes shop, I really do, and why a man like Nin bothers with running such a place day after day. Maybe the whispers I have heard are true, that many of his connections are less than legal.

Nin was not quite sure just how it had happened, but Ebbit had risen like wildfire through the C.F.G. and used his money to spread their message to Toledo, Grand Rapids, Indianapolis. He asked me to explain more to him about the timeline of Ebbit's arrival and what he had said about his reasons for being there.

He nodded thoughtfully throughout. 'You just watch what happens,' he said. 'Read the papers, whatever you can get. People have a way of getting hurt wherever he goes. Not by him, no. Never by him personally.' Watch out, Nin said, that he does not try to buy more land. He said that would be a clever game, to slowly buy out a place so small as Porto, and then kick open the doors to his friends so their vision of a better world could be built. Nin smiled then in a strange way. It was like every cynical thought he had about human nature was coming true every day, and he felt smug about it.

I left the shop feeling a sense of dread. I rode back home on Pierre rather than stay in Faribault for lunch. The place always seems too loud to me. But then even Charleston seemed too loud to me in the college years.

Getting back into town, I felt drawn toward Rosary Glen. I have not been past there in a lot of years. I told myself, If it begins to rain even a little, I will not go. But it held off, even though the clouds were low and mean. I even took the wrong path at the branch where the streams meet before I caught myself. The path is so overgrown now, it looks like it has not been used for years.

The glen was muddy and slippery and Pierre did not like it even when it smoothed out. The roof of the church now has a hole in it and is due for total collapse, if not this year then the next, or maybe the next. One truly heavy snowfall. The window glass is still holding up though. Who cut that glass so thick a hundred fifty years ago, I wonder; how did they do that? Sad how the fire turned the color of the glass all around. The heat darkened it. I remember it used to be so perfectly red and orange and yellow. I pulled on the front door to make sure the lock is still firm. I tied Pierre out front and walked around back.

You can see the exact line that Spalding does not cross when he bothers to tend the cemetery. Once you move south past the old bird bath and Natty Tupper's tomb, there is no hint of tending anymore. It is completely overgrown and it stays that way for a hundred yards where the property rises and bleeds into the woods. Spalding's son is ten now and knows to keep it that way too when Spalding passes away someday.

It was last year of schooling when I last walked up that little rise to the edge of the woods. I was sixteen, I think? I had not even dared to speak to Christine yet, just a lot of foolish eyes-making at Temperance Hall. Still, I got the same feeling as I went. A queasy stomach and a dry mouth.

The three graves are still there, no more than fifty paces into the trees. The wooden markers are still very firm in the earth, thank God. How I remember the day when Bob and Big Joe Sweed came to me looking so frightened, not at all like the men I hunted with sometimes, and told me the markers were in danger of falling over if they were not righted and made more secure, and that they had a terrible feeling that someone needed to do something soon to save them. It took them two days to work up the courage to go out one afternoon and shore them up. They never told anyone else about that endeavor. Bob had a terrible dream that night, of three giant swans floating far away on the sea at night, but when he guided his great schooner past them, they had no eyes and he looked down and saw their eyes in his hands. He swore to me later that he would sooner hang himself than touch those markers again.

Sometimes I wonder what would happen if the markers were to be photographed. They do haunt the eye so. No names, no dates, no words at all. Just one strange symbol etched on each. I feel funny about drawing them in this diary. A hand, a sword, a spider. One day someone from out of town will find them, someone who should not be out there, and they will have a camera, and they will use it, and what then?

Unlike when I was sixteen, I thought a silent prayer as I stood beside the graves. I simply prayed that everything was going to be all right. And I turned and walked very quickly away without looking back before the rain got a mind to wake up.

At home, I told Christine everything about the signs in Ebbit's yard, and what Corbin Nin had told me. She needs to know. Memory note: Arrange to refund Adam Bergstrom for overpayment of his summer levy. Memory note: Have Spalding put up a No Trespassing sign at Rosary Glen. Give him the wording tomorrow.

December 12th.

I had done a great job of avoiding the confrontation, I must say. No one will ever accuse me of being aggressive in this case. But yesterday I had Brian leave a note in Ebbit's box asking that he come to me in the office this morning and here he came, but with his wife in tow, which I was not expecting.

I had mentally rehearsed the first thing I was going to say to him, but then he surprised me by saying how it was as if I were a mind-reader, and how fortunate my invitation made everything. He had a proposal and was wondering about its finer points, the legalities. He had done some research and found out that the Tristan Bennett property adjacent to the barn where Cherry Road runs off into the culvert will revert to the town as of June of next year, having reached the cutoff for any other claims. Ebbit wanted to file a writ to purchase it should things remain static.

I asked him why he wanted it, which of course I didn't have any particular right to do, and he seemed a bit taken aback. His brother, he said. His brother was a printer and interested in setting up in a small town like Porto but lacked the funds to do so. 'Not all the Ebbits have a head for business,' he said, and at this his wife smiled as if to say, 'Oh, isn't that so.'

I said to Ebbit, too quietly maybe, 'There has been a complaint about your protection of your property.' He pleaded dumb to this, and he pleaded it very convincingly, I have to say, as if he has trained himself for such situations. I said to him, 'A man named Robert Moses, a very good man, feels one of your signs is not just a warning to trespassers. That it actually challenges three different types of people you seem to have decided are ungodly and unworthy of residence in Porto, or Minnesota, or anywhere.'

Ebbit became kind of sleek then, kind of slippery. He claimed that Bob had used the ruse of checking the wheel on his handcart as he passed the property to start an altercation, to verbally abuse him about his beliefs, and though Ebbit had learned over the past ten years that this kind of abuse was, in general, as empty as a Maine peanut, it was best to assert one's rights in response. 'I am more educated than people think,' he said, 'and I know my rights, and it would be advantageous to everyone here to know that unlike most people, I will not hesitate to defend them.'

He had much to express and had no intention of hiding his views, he said. His main purpose with the signs, he claimed, was to keep everyone safe and behind their boundaries. If anyone from Porto came onto his lot, he said, still with that chilly politeness, his hat in his hand, they had to know they were on a kind of battleground, and on that battleground was being fought the war of American freedom. 'Freedom from what?' I asked, and he said surely I knew what. I asked him to please educate me.

'Freedom from oppression and tyranny and conspiracy,' he said, 'at the hands of degenerates whose only goal is chaos and the destruction of our most sacred institutions.'

I said to his wife, 'And you, Mrs. Ebbit, do you agree with your husband in these matters?' She looked at me with blank politeness. She gave me the impression she was waiting patiently for the clarity of her husband's point to connect with my simple brain.

She said, 'Mr. Rice, I was not always that way, no, but the mind must learn to see outward and not just inward. I have learned to see clearly. I believe certain people have a certain place here and a certain role to fulfill, and they can even be a valued part of the great American cause, but until they learn to recognize that role and accept it, they are not helping, they are obstructing. I will do what

I can to show these people their honored role.' There was something so rehearsed and inauthentic about her performance that I was doubly appalled.

I laid it out for Ebbit then. I informed him that he would not find his views shared here, but that was not a problem. What *was* a problem was any veiled threat of violence against, say, people stopping on the road to inspect the wheel on their handcart, and if that were to be perceived, it would be dealt with harshly, even if it meant taking it up with the town council.

Ebbit said, 'About the views of the townspeople, I don't care a fig, though I suspect more of your neighbors agree with me than they do with you, which may be why I see so many similar faces here and not a single dissimilar one. My wife and I are here to stay, and we will do as we please. If anyone fancies war instead of just words, I welcome it.'

He added one more thing, which was that his wife would happily pick up his mail from the central post in Faribault from now on during her trips there, and that he did not wish any further town services. With that, the two of them left, he having the last word. Nothing had been accomplished except the drawing of lines.

December 14th.

Busy council meeting. Twenty-three people in attendance at Temperance Hall, more than usual. Budget matters were gone through quickly.

The school will close an extra week at both ends of the term unless the county can part with the money for extended instruction. Strickland Baird has volunteered the use of his old carriage house as a town library for two years, but the funding goal for acquisitions remains stuck at fifty percent or so with no movement and no daylight. I am not sure the number of books Porto needs would fill a good-sized bread bin much less that spooky carriage house, but that is just my view. Dan announced the volunteer list for snow removal all the way up Trampier Road to St. Bridget is back to being at a healthy level.

The moment the agenda was cleared, Bob Moses stood up and talked about Naulus Ebbit, and things got heated quickly. He said that if no one wanted to step forward and take responsibility for the issue, he would take offer to charge himself, to which I and Burt Risley objected, strongly. We told everyone that dealing with a possible offender is what the Faribault police were for, but judging from the outcry that met this very unwise statement, everyone considered that to be a parlor joke, as I secretly do myself. Elizabeth Sherwood stood and delivered a rather long monologue about honor and decency which bored everyone enough to at least settle them down for a while, but the ants in their pants got the better of them and the people sitting around Elizabeth began very rudely to interject, so she ended her sermon sooner than she intended.

Lyle Brennith went next. I thought, Oh Lord, here it comes. He cleared his throat and announced that if he saw Ebbit out walking with that Henry .44 caliber of his while his own children were being schooled less than a half mile away, he would give himself permission to open the man's veins. I noticed Edith beside me flinch. Something about that phrase brought silence to the room. Or maybe it was that a temper like Lyle's leaves no room for response.

It was then that Strickland Baird called out, 'Why don't we talk about the real problem?' He did not stand, so heads had to turn to him. I sighed and asked him what he thought that was. He said, 'If we let this wretch do as he likes, the problem is gonna be what might happen up at Rosary Glen.'

Dan cut him short right there, saying there would be no talk of that kind of business here, or anywhere else. Strickland looked down at the floor. The two of them have always hated each other. I panicked a little and adjourned the meeting there. I cannot believe Strickland said such a thing. Everyone filed out unhappy, and thinking even more troubled thoughts no doubt.

Strickland came up and muttered an apology to me and I soothed him by telling him, off the record, that there were ways to block any land grab Ebbit might try. We could do a lot to make sure his dark heart was kept right there at the end of Cherry Road, and nowhere else.

I collected my papers, said good night to Dan and Richard, and I left when I knew everyone else was long gone. But Edith was still sitting out on the step in the cold. I could barely see her face. No moon at all tonight. I sat down beside her and asked her what was wrong.

She asked me, 'Will the gifters come?'

I said, 'How long have you known that word, who taught it to you?' I haven't heard it spoken in a very long time. She said she has known it since she was twelve. She had gotten it out of her mother before she died. She was not told any specific stories. She did not even really know what the word meant, but she knew enough to be afraid.

I told her that the gifters had never come in my lifetime or in the lifetime of anyone in town, so for all we knew, they were nothing more than gossip. 'Why would you think I would know anything about that?' I asked her. She looked away and wrapped her arms around herself. She said, 'Sometimes I forget you are only twenty years older than me, but I guess that's enough to have lived my life twice over.' I told her to walk home before she caught a cold. I went with her halfway and she insisted on going the rest alone, fiercely independent as ever.

Something I will not tell her is that when I was her age, I also was frightened of the gifters, oh yes. But they never came. It was Lida Mathison who showed me those three graves. I was ten. It was punishment for throwing a rock at her mangy one-eyed cat. It was summertime. My happiest summer, as I recall. Ms. Mathison grabbed my arm and hauled me right through the woods behind her house. It was not Mom or Dad or even my poor sad Billy—I can barely even bring myself to write my own brother's name. It was old mean Lida Mathison who told me about the gifters.

Billy had seemed like a god to me that summer. He taught me how to outsmart an angry bee and how to dodge a ball that even Ricky Risley might throw, God rest his soul.

We are *all* afraid of the gifters, even someone like Lyle Brennith. We will just have to see what happens.

December 17th.

Out for a long walk this morning to clear my head. Bob Moses had a full cup of that strange coffee brew of his waiting for me as I passed his shop. I will never be able to break him down and tell me

what he adds to it. He assures me it's nothing suspicious, but nothing can taste that good that does not break some law.

We stood watching Trampier Road, just enjoying the silence. At a little past ten we heard a bit of commotion around the bend and here came three lumber wagons loaded down with cargo, and Bob made fun of the expression on the drivers' faces as they navigated the pits in the road. The lead driver tipped his hat to us. Bob thought the wagons must be headed through to Morrystown. But when they kept moving north, I got a bad feeling.

I excused myself and started walking north. As soon as I was out of Bob's sight, I hurried into a jog. I went up Bannister Lane. There was nothing I could do to avoid being seen by Merv Lemke, so I called out that I was late for some business matter and hurried by. It turns out there is life in these old legs yet. I was able to more or less keep pace with the sounds of the lumber wagons by making cut-throughs I still remember from my school days. The creepy old stump as tall as I am is still in the woods behind Birch Road.

I climbed the rise where it meets the stream. Bob claims it is the highest point in town, but I swear if I measured it he would owe me a beer. I was totally out of breath. But that is as far as I needed to go. Looking down to the west, I saw that the wagons had stopped well short of Naulus Ebbit's house, which was just a little dollhouse in the far distance. The drivers' obvious intent was to unload their cargo in the ravine a hundred yards away from it. It looked like they had huge amounts of canvas to protect it for a while. I turned and snuck back like a thief through the woods before anyone could spot me.

Back at the office, I hunted through Edith's baffling file system for the maps the county had sent us some years back for archiving. I eventually found them and spread out on the table the sketches of the house on Cherry Road and the land between it and the Bennett Place. I compared these to the documents Naulus Ebbit had produced when he first entered town.

His land in front of his house may well be cut off hard by Cherry Road, but stretching back in the other direction, he owns everything from the ravine all the way to Hessian's Stream. If Ebbit wants to build there, he has every right. There is no chance to do it now; the ground will be too hard till spring. But there is room for seven or eight houses if he can get a well squared away. He would not have to stretch much at all to start an entirely new community on that end of town.

I looked up to see Brian Carpenter coming in. I had just about forgotten to tell him to arrange for Ebbit's mail to be held in Faribault, to not go near the property anymore. He had not yet gone back there again, though. As he walked in he was holding five sealed letters in his hands. He set them down on the table. The letters had all been prepared the day before by Naulus Ebbit, to be sent to men with addresses ranging from St. Paul to Indianapolis.

I asked Brian what was going on, and he told me he had just taken these from the week's dropbox collection in front of Temperance Hall, and he had no intention of carrying them up to the post office in Faribault—not until I had read them. He tapped them again and again. I told him I was surprised and a little saddened by what he was suggesting.

He said, 'Look at these,' and flipped the letters over to show that they all bore a small gray seal containing the initials C.F.G. He said, 'I know you suspect what these are, and we are damned well going to find out. I will bring them to Faribault, because that is my job, but you can't tell me we don't need to read them.'

When I persisted again, he became colder than I had ever seen him. Older too. He has lost so much weight, it is not healthy. He gestured to his eyepatch. He said, 'You weren't even born when I got this. I was first in line to fight people like Ebbit when they came through Kansas City. That time it was a hundred of them. I wish I could tell you what it's like to wake up in a charity hospital and with one eye and have the doctor tell you he's hoping you'll throw up the bullet he couldn't dig out of you.'

Kate Greer's laundry room would not open up for another hour but Brian said he knew she was over there already. So we went. The first stage of my corruption was underway, I suppose. Brian told Kate exactly what we needed. There was no way to keep the secret from her. She was perfectly agreeable, and she is trustworthy. I have never told her she was my first secret sweetheart, back when we were barely in lessons. Time has been cruel to her since then.

She carefully applied steam to each seal from a clever kind of kettle she has there in the laundry. They opened with no flaw. Without a word Brian nominated me to do the reading, and I did.

It is all there in each one of the letters, the entire design. It can be pieced together from inference and cold fact as well. It seems to have been hatched more than a year ago. Each of the five men is to begin to make plans to settle in Porto, and contact others in the Circle of Frontier Guardians about the possibility of more land and business acquisitions here. It might take five years, maybe ten, but eventually, the town could be theirs. A town small enough and just far enough away from its incorporated parent city to allow for Ebbit's vision, which is an enclave of 'pure-blooded' citizens who can expand into the valuable fields unhindered. Their ideas will expand with them, and if the ideas are opposed, there will be violence. This is implied in the letters, but very carefully not described.

It is unsettling how much state and federal law he really knows. He completely understands the limitations of the town council. He goes into detail about it. I am not sure that even an old-timer like Brian fully understands that it is only through the shared belief in our way of governing that the town functions. The generation will come soon when it all breaks down and we become absorbed by Faribault's rigid codes, an administrative afterthought to them, poor cousins living in the middle of nowhere.

To his credit, Brian did not ask me to read the letters. He trusted me to tell him that yes, they were exactly what he thought they were. Kate applied the seals again with great patience and care. I thought for a moment even that she was trying to impress me. Brian took the letters north, and I assume they are on their way even now to their destinations.

I have withheld from him that two quite familiar names appeared in Ebbit's letters, names of locals I am not surprised are identified in them as sympathetic to the cause of the C.F.G., and willing to work in its favor. One of them is Kate's father. I wonder how many more there are among us.

December 19th.

Lyle would not let go of going out to Cherry Road tonight after he got wind of what the lumber wagons probably meant from talking to Bob. He had a right, he said. I said okay, we would go, but we would go only to take a look from a distance, and only because he has a lien on two lots that

border the property via the eastern culvert, an economic interest. No one else could go. It took some argument to get him to agree not to bring his rifle along. We have to resist every urge to do that.

He met me at the office at three. I happened to need a witness for the signing of Claude Nokes' will, and he did that for me and even made a few dollars for it, cash. Then we went out toward Cherry Road. I wanted to get there and back in time for a late supper so Christine wouldn't worry.

Unlike the other day, this time we used the trail to come up behind the Bennett place. The wind was aggravating. It was getting toward evening. Eventually Lyle became a dark shape and his presence was not much more than the crunch of the leaves beside me. I told him that we could not take any chances on being seen. Now was not the time for a dust-up.

He stopped well short of the break into the clear because he spotted something on a tree up ahead. We detoured a little off course to inspect it.

The sign was almost four feet high. Someone had to nail it into the tree multiple times at the top and bottom to keep it steady when the wind kicked up. We could not make it out at first, too dark. Things got comical when we both searched our pockets for matches, and it seemed like somehow our mutual habit for cigarettes did not include any means of lighting them. Finally Lyle found one match, just one. He struck it against the sign itself to light it.

It was almost more a painting really, like we had found ourselves in an outdoor exhibit of art. There was the image of a long slender man whose mouth was open so wide in a scream of pain that it defied anatomical possibility. His head was drawn to almost half the size of his body. There was the crude suggestion that his hands were snared behind his back. A rope was painted around his neck, twisting up off the top edge of the pine plank and into nowhere. Whoever had done this artwork had not properly planned for the sheer number of words he wanted to add beside and around the image, so the words were all mashed together and the letters got smaller toward the bottom, like he was desperate to get them all in. There has never been a fouler message written anywhere, or a more defiant display of profanity and hatred for others. Lyle had to snuff out the match before I even got to the very end of the message, it was singeing his fingers.

We came out nearer the ravine than I thought we would. I stopped when I realized someone was there in the field, waiting for us just up ahead. There was a very small fire burning, built inside a small pile of rocks and dying out. It was too late to backtrack and conceal ourselves again.

A man called out to us. He said, 'You've been spotted. Come forward.'

We went. was a giant of a man. He was built like a furnace. His head was neatly shaved all around. In his right hand he was holding a kind of bat, like for playing stickball, but it was cut in a strange way, tapered into more of a weapon. On his left side stood a little puffy-faced boy. On his right side stood a little girl. She was the only one sufficiently dressed against the cold. Almost a quarter mile behind this little line of defense we could see the Ebbit house. The very last rays of the sun were just glancing off the top of the chimney.

The man said, 'You'll be needing to give me the password.' This got Lyle so mad he almost spit. He told this brute we were acquaintances of Mr. Ebbit.

'Password,' the man said. We of course gave him nothing.

He said, 'Which one of you wants to lose his hands first?'

I tried to speak some sense, something placating, but he interrupted. 'My name is Wes Still,' he said. 'I've trained my girl to know the property line back here. Watch.' The girl ran forward a few steps in that hopping way children have, her hair bouncing, and she knelt and pointed in an exaggerated way at the feeble fire smoking in the pile of rocks. 'Right *there!*' she said.

Wes Still said to us, "Come past that line, and in the name of the Circle of Frontier Guardians, I *will* take your hands.'

I calmly informed him that the sign we had just passed in the woods was not on Naulus Ebbit's legal property, and as such, we intended to take it down the very next morning, accompanied by the county sheriff if need be.

'It's not my friend's sign,' he told us. 'My boy drew it. I gave him the words and he did the rest all by himself. You wouldn't make a kid feel bad, would you?' The boy was no more than nine or ten. He looked at us with no curiosity, and no emotion. The little girl had lost interest in us all. She sat by the fire and tossed bits of leaves into it.

'You'll be talking to Mr. Ebbit only through me from now on,' Still told us, and he spoke his full name again, very slowly, so we would remember it. He wished us both a good night and then told his children to follow him, and they did right quick. He walked away sort of twirling his weapon just so. He must be six and a half feet tall. I could sense Lyle preparing to shout something after him. I put my hand on his arm to keep him quiet.

Still and his young disappeared into the darkness. We stood watching until their silhouettes surfaced again far away, near the glow in the windows of the Ebbit house. Someone opened the back door for them, the woman I think, and they went inside. Lyle and I walked back via the road.

Now there is no sleep for me. I know that tomorrow I have to ride to see Nana Maeve. It cannot be avoided. I think about that sign in the woods, and what it would be like to come across it alone and well after dark if I was the kind of poor soul those men are so scared of. What a moment that would feel like, to strike a match or hold a lantern high and see that.

Then I think about something stranger. My imagination is an odd beast. I imagine no one ever coming across that sign again, and it just rotting there over the years, hating blindly. Hating into a nothing space. A quiet void out there in the woods. Just a perch for birds, collecting snow. Why do I think about that?

This spring, Nana Maeve will be ninety-five years old.

December 21st.

Coldest day of the year so far, felt like. The wind was terrible, but where is the snow? If I was looking for an excuse not to keep going down Deacon Road, the weather would certainly have done. But I kept going. I forget sometimes how far Nana is, almost a third of the way to Warsaw. I had the morbid thought of what will happen when she dies, who will find her.

But she is as alert and as cynical as she was when I was just a kid. She moves very slowly and there seems to be no end to her collection of stray cats, but once again I was ready to worry for her

terribly and once again I am reassured she will outlive us all. She even has a man friend now apparently, a gent twenty years younger, a soapmaker who visits from Faribault once a week.

We sat at the hearth and she gave me sassafras tea, just like the old days. We talked about a lot of things, and even a few salty things, and she cackled a lot when she saw my embarrassment. I did not mention anything about the problems in town, and she has not heard anything about them. A fat sullen black cat she has named Barge camped on my lap half the afternoon. He looked completely unhappy.

I wanted to be home by dark but it wasn't until the light was well gone from the sky that I even brought myself to ask her my question: 'Nana, *did* the gifters ever come in your lifetime?'

She seemed almost relieved that I had asked. She wondered how I had gone so long without trying to find out. Told me to go get one last cup of tea. When I sat down again, she moved to her rocking chair and started smoking one of those Lorillards whose smell mortifies me.

It happened when she was just seventeen, and never since. Seventy-eight years ago now, but she said she was not likely to ever forget. There were more than three hundred people in Porto then with the factory still going strong, and it was known by its old name, Portobelle. Nana had just married her husband, who was exactly twice her age. The church at Rosary Glen was thriving, and times were generally favorable.

The wealthiest man in Portobelle was named Troom, but he was, in Nana's words, uglier than the rear end of a rear end, and not terribly bright. Into town one day came a woman he had convinced to marry him after two years of sending letters back and forth across the ocean. Nana saw her the day she arrived in town. She was struggling alone with a valise down Trampier Road, which was almost twice as long as it is now. She had offered a very sunny hello to Nana, who was on her way to Wednesday services. 'Spoke British,' Nana said, 'and don't you think the men just went dog-ears over that!'

The woman's name was Charlotte. She could sing beautifully, Nana said. The notion of a church soloist at Rosary Glen was born, and she was called upon to read the pastoral prayer sometimes. Bewitched the whole town, except for the women. The women never liked her much, apparently. Didn't like her elaborate hair or her funny English words for things or the collection of necklaces she showed Nana's friend Efie Patek, one for each day of the week. She didn't seem to care about the town's approval. Didn't come out of Troom's house all that much. Never seemed to want to mix.

She and her husband were married inside of a week of her getting to town. And then, six months after that, Troom was dead.

No one thought much about it, Nana said. He was in his sixth decade then, and his habits were bad, and the food he ate was spicy, so it was no great surprise when they found him face-down on his front lawn. It was Father Post who found him, Luther Post whose grandson is now our pastor at St. Bridget. Found him just walking by, the front door of his house open. But no one else came out of the house. Post ran in and found Charlotte Troom upstairs, not yet knowing what had happened. When she saw her husband out there, she screamed to bust the sky.

Nana shook her head in the dark. 'I bet even that scream bewitched the men who heard it,' she said. It is funny how when she talks, she rocks faster back and forth.

It wasn't another six months before Charlotte Troom had pledged to marry a carpenter named Rudy Westerberg, who had become smitten with her when building a little wall around her garden. Good man, Nana said. Not a penny to his name, but a good man. So the resentment for Charlotte Troom abated. It was decided she must have loved Rudy, because for what other reason would she accept his proposal other than love, and a desire for children? He moved into the Troom house after the wedding.

But he vanished, Nana said. Not eight weeks after the nuptials. Left a note that did not seem to make any sense, not to the people who knew him. Westerberg wrote that the chance to join up with a boat out of Lake Superior that would go onward and trade in Canada was something that could not be passed up. It meant enough money to start a family, so he would be back in eighteen months.

Yes, it was strange that Charlotte Westerberg could not produce this letter at first and had not even mentioned her husband's new situation when she showed up to church without him twice in a row. Yes, it was strange that the letter was in handwriting that seemed not to match much with letters the man had written before. But people kept their suspicions to themselves mostly. For a while.

Nana said: 'The gifters coming must've meant she had even more harm to do. There are certain kinds of souls who'll do anything for a fortune, for security... but then could be there are certain kinds of souls who just need to make other people die. Feeds a craving somehow. An itch. Maybe this Brit woman was one of those. Maybe there were troubling reasons she left England, who knows. If there was more harm coming from her, then maybe, yes, that is why the gifters came. Maybe that woman was evil enough to do permanent harm to this town.'

She told me it was June when they came, a lovely hot June night, and very late. Not more than four days after Charlotte had finally shown Rudy's letter to Father Post.

Nana said to me, 'I saw them,' and my jaw dropped. She had been awake. Her sleep had been rough and she had gotten up to sit by the window, as she sometimes did. She lived on Roundtree Road then, which does not even exist now. She remembered looking across and seeing a light in her friend Betty Finn's house, and Betty sitting there looking out too, well past eleven. A lot of folks could not sleep that night, it seemed. Nana's husband slept on, but not for very long.

Only when she got truly sleepy, toward one in the morning, did she leave her watch of the road and go to wash her face and then return to bed. She passed through the little house's sitting room, and that is when she saw something out the side window, which looked out on an empty field where Bob Moses' house stands today.

She said, 'All three of them walked by, no more than ten yards from the window. Trespassing, you would even say, but I guess that would have been the most sensible route to the Troom house from Rosary Glen. One of them light-haired, two of them very dark-haired. Hair longer than even mine was back then. The one in front was holding something. Too dark to see what it was. A little box, I suppose. Real small. They weren't in any hurry. They were thin, is all I can say. Real thin.'

Her husband—my grandfather, who I never knew—had awoken some minutes earlier because a dream about wolves had disturbed him badly. He had been standing beside her. He pulled her back hard from the window. He was scared, bad. She had never seen him like that. He commanded her to come away. 'My God, that is them,' he had said. 'We have *seen* them.' And they retreated to the bedroom, and he had held her tight there. And at dawn my grandfather went to find Father Post and his cousin, and the three of them headed up to the Troom house.

'Those women had brought her a gift, all right,' Nana said. 'Lenny, God rest his soul, couldn't even talk about what they found. It wasn't until he was just about done in by the cancer that he told me. But he was half delirious all that while. They never did find Rudy. Bet you a sausage he's still in the ground on that property somewhere. Woman that size couldn't've planted him that deep all by herself.'

I asked her, 'What did the men do with her then? Was she buried?'

'I assume she was,' Nana said. 'It was Lenny's idea that the body be kept close for a while, just a while. But...' And Nana trailed off there. I thought she was having a very rare moment of senility. But she just did not know how to say what needed to be said.

'But there was really nothing left of her?' I finished for her, and she nodded. She said that the remains had been kept inside the church for a time, in a respectful way, but she could not say what eventually happened to them. When Father Post wrote to the family, they wrote back that they didn't want anything to do with her. For certain, there was no service that she remembered. She would have been there. Everyone in town would have been.

I did not know if I should press Nana further, but I had arrived that day thinking this might be the last time I could ever ask the question I thought about most, so I finally did.

'I don't like to say the word for what they were,' Nana said in reply. 'That word always scared me. Sounds like a quick scratch to the face that draws blood. My gram was one, you know, I'm fair sure. At least, she mixed in that business after her first baby died right inside her. Took hell for mixing in it, from what I've heard. It's no accident her grave out there in Warsaw says what it does. Someone real cruel made sure of that.'

'Back in the century before mine,' she went on, 'to my gram and her folk, and the generation before that, you have to understand, dying was always right at their door, out here all alone. The plain was a thief of life. When the crop wouldn't provide for them or the snow came too early or their babies started coughing black stuff and the nearest doctor was a day's walk away, it wouldn't have been much to turn to other ways to survive. Making things happen that shouldn't happen.'

'But who were they?' I asked. 'No one knows?'

She said, 'You're talking about a time long before anything out here had a name we'd even recognize. All we ever believed growing up was that maybe there were *other* kinds of town councils. Secret ones. Ones of no more than two or three people, who used whispery ways for the town when they had to, and didn't speak about it. Like I said, it was a matter of surviving. We figured those women must have had a vow between 'em to defend this godawful place that lasted past even their hearts stopping. But that ain't a good kind of defending if you ask me. Not if it scares people so. It may be keeping the peace, but it ain't right.'

I asked her about the other times they came. But I could tell she was fading; she needed to sleep. 'My mother knew about one,' she said. 'When she was a little girl. Something about a crazy man, a soldier, not right in the head. Walked into town. Shot people up, screaming about his mother. The gifters came for him too, I guess. And there was peace again.'

Now it is 4 a.m. and I am still writing, because after a late Supper I lied to Christine about going over to play whist with Claude Nokes and I went out again. I felt like a criminal. I stopped at the office to rummage around for half an hour. I almost gave up my search, but I finally found the iron key in a little envelope beside the one where Edith keeps her spectacles. Then I walked all the way to Rosary Glen once again. Did not even fire up the lantern till I got to the church itself.

The kids—are there twelve or thirteen of them now in town, I forget which—seem to have taken to heart never to try to sneak in there. All kinds of tempting darkness and cracks and crevices to explore, but they know. The key barely works now. The rust does not want to give. It could be that Father Post, who they say looks just like his grandfather, has forgotten a copy of the key even exists, or who was trusted with it.

The sound of that big door opening in and scraping the floor, that is a sound I do not want to hear again after tonight. I swear, it feels like everything I have ever feared about loneliness and death was in the sound. It was so dank I started coughing and could not stop at first. Pneumonia and rot, that is all that is left in there. Twenty-nine years this May since the fire. Twenty-eight years since my brother owned up to it. It was not his fault. He was a kid doing stupid kid things.

I wrapped my scarf around my face and walked down the gap between what is left of the pews. The lantern almost snuffed itself right out a couple of times: the bad air. And what is it about old stone that spreads the cold out inside a person so it nestles right in your spine?

You can see part of the graveyard through the north window if you wipe away a little of the grime, which I did. That grime smelled bad, like apricots that have turned. And you can even see up the rise toward the three other graves if you lean just so. But that I did not do.

All the color seemed sucked out of the walls and the ceiling and the windows. It made it hard to see any difference in the stones. I had to walk along the walls on both sides real close, squinting.

Finally there it was, the spot that Nana confessed to knowing about just before I left her. She thinks it was a flaw in the original construction that then became a space for other things. Probably Father Post's rotgut, she said; the man was a fine orator but one of the fiercest drinkers in Portobelle. I pushed on various spots on the damaged hunk of stone and it gave easily enough. I gradually worked it mostly out of place. The hole behind it was just big enough to get my whole hand through.

I felt around in that black little space. The first thing I touched was a cloth bag that was filled with a bunch of chunky dust and something that felt like jagged sticks and seashells that were grainy to the touch. I poked through it all with one finger for a bit and decided it could stay where it was.

I pulled out the clothes little by little. They caught on the edge of the stone a lot. I had to set the lantern down. Took a whole minute to draw them all the way out without tearing them.

I knelt down and unfolded them as best I could on the floor. Pieces of a dress torn in dozens of places, and a set of undergarments too, which I felt a little ashamed to touch. The coloring was so strange I could not figure out what I was really looking at, until I decided that the dress and undergarments had once been a tan color, but had become soaked in blood all over, so they had turned a dark brown, and parts had become almost brittle to the touch.

I stuck my hand back into the niche. What was left in there was a small box. As I tried to bring it out, it caught on the stone and I dropped it back inside the space, just a couple of inches. There was a tiny echo. I tried again. I had to twist my fingers and grasp the box just so. The lid held tight.

I set the box the gifters had brought to Charlotte Troom, who became Charlotte Westerberg, down beside her death dress on the floor and set the lantern right beside it. It was made of cedar. Maybe six inches long. Someone had bound it with a thin piece of string, criss-cross. I got out my knife and cut it.

Under the lid was both the original bow that had once graced the box, red and delicate, and a piece of jewelry. A pendant. I do not know about such things, but I would say it must be pretty dear. The shape of a half-moon. Green. Perfect condition except for the natural weight of years.

I put all of it back into the niche, fixed the stone as tight as I could get it, and got out of there. I have decided that the stuff inside that cloth bag must have been bones, it must have been.

December 22.

Chaos. I got to the office mid-day and was not there fifteen minutes when Edith came at a trot up to the building. She was out of breath when she threw open the door. Told me I had to get out to Cherry Road as fast as I could. Something was happening with Ebbit.

We did not go on foot this time. I was so exhausted from last night that I had ridden Pierre into town, so off we went with Edith holding on tight, burying the side of her face in my back. I had to remind Pierre again and again that we were not riding to Boston and needed to be there by nightfall, it was just one and a half miles.

There were a dozen people standing on the road at the edge of Ebbit's property. We heard their voices before we came around the corner. A couple of them had ventured onto the grass itself and would have gone further had it not been for the Doberman, which was straining at the end of his tether. It had been wrapped around a dead stump twice to shorten its range. The shouts were more or less constant, rising here, falling there, always someone gesturing angrily, pointing toward the house, yelling harassment and curses. I saw Strickland Baird and Lyle and Bliley Ramsey. Father Post was even there, trying to keep some kind of peace.

Naulus Ebbit was standing on his stoop, reading very loudly from a book in his hands, like a preacher. Come to find it was the work of Monty Upchurch, the man who founded the Circle of Frontier Guardians. His treatise on purity and democracy and the need to destroy the elements who would undermine it. Ebbit was in fine voice, and his tone was almost cheerful. He was reveling in his antagonism.

Edith had told me on the way what happened. The Kendalls' dog had been found shot down the road. Strickland had intended to march right up to the door to confront Ebbit, guard dog or no guard dog, but had been met on the grass instead by Wes Still, who had been happy to own up to the deed. Said the mutt was a stray and he had children to protect. But the dog had been well clear of Ebbit's land. Bliley had heard the shouting and the situation escalated fast.

Still was sitting on the apex of the sloped roof—precariously it looked to me—looking down at everyone in silence, a rifle in his hand pointed to the sky. His face was a blank page. In one of the

high windows, Nora Ebbit was looking out, but she at least looked worried, and I thought very sad. She looked like a prisoner in there. Like a ghost trapped in that house, wishing she could be alive.

What really was awful to see was the children, Still's children. They were both standing up on the stoop too like they belonged to Ebbit. They were hollering out the worst words you could imagine, letting the folks who had dared to set foot on the grass have hell, calling them the names that were supposedly reserved for the elements Ebbit and Still were out to burn from the earth. They are too young to even get their hatred right. And all the while the Doberman dog barked and tried to wrench itself free of its chain.

Mike Grimes kept trying to settle people down and move them away, but even as he did, he himself kept yelling insults at Ebbit. I spun him around and reminded him that he was supposed to be the law here, and to help me get everyone off the road.

The more Ebbit pretended he did not hear or see their wrath, the more angry people became. I had to physically move some of them further away from the property. Lyle was holding his rifle and I practically knocked it out of his hands. I am sure no one had ever seen me so upset. Finally the demands that Ebbit leave town and take his friend and these awful children with him tapered off, and the only voice in the air was Ebbit's. He wiped his glasses with his handkerchief and happily droned on from the book, something about the distribution of wealth among property owners, bastardizing some verse from the Bible.

Mike Grimes announced to him that he was approaching, unarmed, to sort this out, and that was when Wes Still finally called down to us from the roof. He said, 'No, not today.' I almost could not hear it because not for a moment did Ebbit stop his monologue. His only pauses were to turn a page.

Mike informed both of them over Ebbit's prattling that the police from Faribault would be out to pay a visit tomorrow, and to this he got no reaction except from the little boy, who called him an awful word and laughed and ran back into the house. The little girl followed him. Wes Still sat not moving a muscle, cradling his rifle, looming over us all.

Mike gave up then and came back to the crowd. Before people started splitting off to head back where they came from, I pleaded with them that playing Ebbit's game was the surest way to never get rid of him, that they had to be patient, but more than one of them had harsh words for how I and Mike Grimes were handling things. I seem to be on a deadline. They did not need to give me one, I already feel it.

Arrangements being made now for Mike to ride up to Faribault first thing tomorrow.

December 23rd.

Edith was quick with posting broadsides I drew up this morning, and Brian was able to spread the word about the council meeting all afternoon. So when I opened the doors of Temperance Hall at seven, there were better than forty people out there, shivering in the cold. We only have twenty chairs, so in the end a lot of people had to stand. Kate Greer walked coffee back and forth from the laundry, God bless her heart. Not nearly enough, but some, and piping hot. Every little bit of comfort helped tonight.

Funny how despite the size of the gathering, no one seemed to feel like speaking tonight. Maybe this is what real frustration and real anger do to people. It is the first time feelings like this have come here in my lifetime, even when the shoe factory closed and so many people drifted away.

I was so tired. I explained to all about how it went with Mike's mission to Faribault and told them it was not just Ebbit the police would be talking to, but some of us as well, and that they had made it clear that any antagonism of Ebbit would be dealt with just as attentively as anything he might do to us. This got a chorus of jeers. Mike looked pained. He has never felt such animosity, not even when he tried to forbid drinking on Saturdays as well as Sundays.

Linda Roebuck raised her hand from the side. It is so rare that she speaks, even after church, even in happy company, I could not possibly deny her. She has never spoken at a council meeting, she only comes to hope the library might get built, but she has never offered a word of passion or protest. She stood with her back against the wall like she was trying to disappear into it. It was tough to hear her at first, but she seemed to realize she was sounding weak, so then she started speaking so loudly it was kind of a wonder. Jimmy Roebuck was off working the lakeboats, like every night except two a month.

She said she wanted to know if she and Jimmy should leave town tomorrow and not come back until someone came to give them the clear. She had felt a change in the air. She could not describe it. She felt something terrible was about to happen, and though she did not want to say what it was, she was hoping that everyone in the room knew what she was talking about. She just wanted someone to tell her if she and Jimmy should go. Now.

As I listened to her I became panicked that someone else would echo this, and then someone else, and we would find ourselves in talk that I did not know to control anymore. But Linda was interrupted.

The door had opened again, and Naulus Ebbit was coming into the hall. He was all alone. Every head turned to him. No one said anything. He was dressed in the dapper little suit he wore every day, all day, now with an overcoat that probably cost half of Jimmy Roebuck's monthly wages. His hair was slicked back neat as could be, as usual. He removed his hat and dropped it on the table where Kate had put the coffee urn. He did not look around for a seat. It was obvious he had come here to speak. So Dan called him forward, asked him to please come up for some questions.

He looked proud as a peacock, he really did. Walked past everyone, did not look anyone in the eye, came right up to the front, stood before me and Dan and Edith and Mike. I asked him if he would like to say something first to assure everyone there that he could suggest a way we could all live quietly together before there was any more need to involve authorities outside the town.

'Peace,' he said, 'is not so much of interest to me, sir. I have not raised that topic with my friends who will be arriving in town in the spring. Whether there is peace or not depends on many things, mostly all of you. Things are going to be changing here—legally I assure you, but opposition will not be met on friendly terms.'

I said to him, 'That is the kind of talk that is going to result in a lot of pain, sir.' Some folks present murmured agreement with this.

But Ebbit just laughed. First time I saw him do that. He said, 'As for pain, oftentimes good soil must be ploughed roughly. It is the regrettable price of gaining advantage.'—He looked right at me then,

and said, 'Would it pain *you*, Mr. Rice, for example, to have your brother found and brought to justice for the things he has done? Your brother the arsonist, your brother the thief and the addict? Would it pain you to have questions asked about how young Edith here was when he seduced her?'

My heart felt like it had slammed shut permanently. I could not even turn my head to look at Edith.

There was one voice that spoke then, Mike's voice, right beside me. The voice of the law, supposedly. He said to Ebbit, 'You are going to die here, sir.'

Ebbit laughed again. 'Feel free at any time to inquire with either myself or Mr. Still about the many things I have learned not only about your ridiculous way of self-government and the open illegalities you perpetuate with it, but also about your personal hypocrisies, which may have their uses if a single hand is laid on me or anyone I know, and if there is any further interference to my very law-abiding hopes for this fine town.'

And with that, he wished us all a good night, pledged allegiance to the Circle of Frontier Guardians, praised God's goodwill for his kind, turned and began to walk out. I thought certainly that someone would stop him, just would not be able to control themselves. He walked within a foot of Bob Moses, who I once saw fight off a starving black bear with his fists near the lake. Bob did nothing. Ebbit's hate has put a trance on us, I swear to God. He walked right out the door. His horse was waiting for him.

Mike turned his head to look at me. He was asking for permission without a word to end the night right then before everything went up in a bonfire of insanity, and I nodded to him. He stood up and cleared his throat and told everyone to go back home and collect themselves, and said again that the involvement of the Faribault police was imminent. People started moving real slow. No debate.

Before anyone got all the way out the door, Father Post called something out. He said he thought someone may have gone into the church at Rosary Glen last night. He asked everyone to please stay away from there, or the cemetery, or the woods beyond it. He did not have to explain why.

No commotion on Trampier Road, Ebbit was well gone. There was talk but it was very quiet.

One-fifteen a.m. now. For the second night in a row, I have been out very late. Tonight very different from last night.

A knock on the door woke Christine up, and she thought she was shaking me awake but in fact I had barely closed my eyes. Half past ten.

Lyle Brennith was outside on the step. He asked me to come with him to Bob Moses' shop. Said a couple of others were there already. Something that could not be put off. He apologized to Christine, but she practically forced me out the door. Did not need to know anything. Just the look on his face told her it was important. I went. But I damn well stopped to bundle up first. Lyle said we had a visitor from out of town, but that was all he wanted to say. He would leave the rest for inside the shop.

Once there, we went back into the store room. Mike Grimes was there, as was Bob, leaning against a stack of crates. And so was Corbin Nin, sitting and turning a small bottle over and over in his

fingers in an idle way, turning it into a dexterity toy. No hands were shaken. Mike lit another lantern and we got to it.

Nin had a proposal—services for pay. He stated the price up front. He said he was aware the town needed a solution to its new problem, and given what we were dealing with, he felt he would be of the most help. From what Mike had told him, he did not think we were really aware of the severity of the problem, and who we were dealing with.

Wes Still, for example, he said. There was a mother grieving in Madison about where her son disappeared to after he walked into the wrong tavern two years ago. Still and his friends knew.

Nin stated his obscenely high price a second time. For that price, he offered complete assurance he could solve Porto's problem. Not that the state police wouldn't look into the situation afterwards, no, but by then, with the problem solved, the men who had solved it would be gone. Nin guaranteed it.

I listened patiently, then I looked to Lyle and asked if it was him who had brought Nin here. But it had been Nin who had come down on his own. There wasn't a detail of the situation he didn't already have when he got in a carriage to ride to Porto.

I said, 'Tell me exactly what you mean.' All we needed to know, Nin said, was that the woman would not die, the children would not die. 'There will be a fire,' he said. 'But there have been fires before. Your first church burned out some years back, correct?'

I asked another question. As a sign of trust, I put it. I said, 'Mr. Nin, am I mistaken that you yourself have paid dues to the Circle of Frontier Guardians? Did that not come up in the *Pioneer Press* some time ago? Attended a meeting or two? Out in a field somewhere?'

He shrugged and said, 'I have reason to settle accounts with this man, just like you do. Mine is a business reason. Your interests and mine happen to be merging. And let me tell you, Mr. Rice, you do not have what it takes to control this.'

I thanked him for coming to us, from all the way in Faribault. He said a reply would be necessary by nightfall tomorrow, and the reply could only come directly to him, delivered on horseback or by carriage, because he would not be returning to Porto, not for a long time. He held up that bottle he had been mucking with, and asked Bob if it was all right if he took it home with him. It was tooth powder from Bob's stock. Nin explained he was clean out.

When he was gone and the front door of the shop was closed, I said to the others I assumed it was fear of Nin and his associations that had caused them to entertain him for so long and drag me out of bed when I was as tired as I had ever been in my life. We would not be giving him even the favor of a reply.

Lyle said, 'Why don't you sleep on it. No one is making any good decisions tonight.' I closed my eyes and put my hands to my face. I wanted them blotted out, I wanted everything blotted out.

'The thing of it is,' Bob said, 'is that Nin's way might be the only way those people survive the month.'

I know he was right. But I would not say it. I feel a change in the air too. It is impossible to describe in words.

Christmas day.

Morning mass, crowded, but no sign of Ebbit or Still there, as usual, then a visit from Christine's parents. Supper at one. I wanted to make sure they were on their way back to Owatonna by three.

Father Post and I spent the hours between then and evening mass walking from house to house. We wanted to let everyone know that the services were being moved up to five o'clock and that with that one exception, perhaps no one should be out after dark for just a little while. I saw the Bergstrom kids playing out in the street. They asked me to pay a round of Fifty-Five Man Alive, and I actually did. A lot of good memories with that game.

Knocked on a lot of doors this afternoon. I saw the interiors of houses I never had before. A lot of pretty tree decorations and little nativity scenes. Fortunately all the gifts had been opened by then, and I did not seem to interrupt much but dinner preparations.

Very few people asked me in to tell them what I needed to. Their front steps would do. Everyone seemed to understand about the curfew. Elizabeth Sherwood cried when I told her. Wanted to walk to St. Bridget right then to pray. Linda Roebuck cried too. Jimmy has to work tonight. She will be alone for the next three nights, but she said maybe she would go to Kate's. But Brian had a tear too, and was not ashamed of it. Did not even try to wipe it away. Just kept shaking his head, over and over.

So now, at least, everyone knows to stay in when the sun does down, and maybe not look out their windows. I debated whether I had time to go see Nana Maeve, and I almost did not. But to the stable I went, and Pierre got me out there just as it was getting dark. I brought Nana some blackberry jam. Christine made the bow.

Nana took my gift at the door. No tea offered. She seemed to know I had to get back. 'You think they're coming?' she said, and I replied to her, just like I had replied to Elizabeth when she asked, 'Yes, I think they are coming. And I think it will be tonight.'

Home now. It has been dark for two hours. The fire is going and I have rosebud tea that Christine made for me. I will not open this diary again until well after the new year. I have written my last words about what has happened here, and what *might* happen here. I love this place too much to describe any more. Someone else will have to write the full story someday.

By half past ten, almost the entire town was asleep. Inside Temperance Hall, which had been spontaneously opened up for the night by the town manager, William Rice, more than twenty people lay on makeshift bunks or cots or just piles of clothes they had dragged there themselves. Five families, including six children. It had been a good notion, these families agreed as they sipped cider brought to them by the laundress Kate Greer, to allow the use of the hall for fellowship tonight, and for the next few as well. There was comfort in numbers. This same sort of fellowship was happening in small ways here and there throughout town. Even Dan Hagen and Strickland Baird

had silently patched up their longstanding and mysterious enmity to bring their families together under Dan's sizeable roof for the night. Carols had been sung around the tree, and both men had passed out drunk before their tongues got the better of them.

A lot of liquor was consumed that night, none more so than by Big Joe Sweed, whom the bottle was killing slowly and surely, devouring his reputation as an expert hunter and construction foreman. He had staggered out of his shack at eight vowing to get a good look at who he thought might be walking through town that very night from the direction of Rosary Glen. Even all the whiskey he put down in two short hours, though, would not give him the courage to go out that far, so he wound up stumbling into the bean fields off Deacon Road and passing out, hauled from there the next morning and cleaned up by Claude Nokes, one of his brothers in the Circle of Frontier Guardians. No one else in Porto was bold or foolish enough to challenge the curfew.

At 10:35, little Beth Still, age seven, got up from her bed on the top floor of Naulus and Nora Ebbit's home, wrapped her blanket around her shoulders, and walked out of the bedroom she shared with her brother Raymond. She got overexcited sometimes thinking of the house her daddy would be building for them in the spring, and when she could not sleep so well because of the cold, she liked to sneak out into the hallway and look out the big window at the fields spread out below, where the lumber for the house awaited its intended use. Beth did not like living with the Ebbits. The woman scared her a little. She smiled a lot, yes, but Beth thought the smile was only a mask for show, and that there was a lot of crying when no one was there to see. She was sick an awful lot.

Tonight, Beth was extra-excited because of the toys her Daddy had bought her and her brother for Christmas, and it seemed like forever until she would be able to get up with the light and play with them. Now she stood on tiptoes, shivering, to see out the gable window facing east. It was so chilly in the hall tonight she could see her breath cloud on the glass.

Two fields away, she could see tiny people walking in the general direction of the house across the dead grass. There was just enough moon tonight to make out the shapes of their bodies. Three people. *How cold they must be!* Beth thought. She could not imagine where they might be going to, but in her young mind, grownups had all sorts of secret tasks to do late at night. She imagined sometimes they kept building the world when she was asleep, and she hoped they knew not to get too close to the edges as they went, because they might fall over.

Seeing the faraway people walking out there started to give her a scary sort of feeling. Their steady pace made her think of windup people with blank eyes, and she did not like those. So when her toes started to hurt, she crept back into the bedroom and returned to safety under the covers. And she was fast asleep within minutes.

Her father was two stories beneath her, in the kitchen of the Ebbit house. Wes Still was doing the one thing that calmed his nerves these days, which was painting in oils. He had turned to the hobby after the death of his wife, teaching himself and mimicking the sketches he had found in a book showing an artist's depictions of the wonders along the Mississippi River. He showed his paintings to almost no one, so no one realized how skilled he had truly become. Tonight after the Christmas meal he had begun a new landscape solely from a memory of passing three fallen barns on his family's way here from Madison. As he painted, his small canvas propped up on the finest easel he had been able to afford, he drank to what for him was excess, but it didn't make his hand unsteady or his interior vision faulty. He planned to hang this landscape in his little girl's room come springtime.

There came a soft tapping on the door from outside. Still looked up, confused, silently mouthing the words *What the hell?*

He had left his rifle upstairs in his room, and the fog the liquor had grown inside his brain dulled his capacity for real anger. He set his brush down on a wet rag, picked up the lantern he had placed beside the easel just so, and went to the door that led out into the back yard, wondering why Pepper hadn't barked.

The tapping came again, gently, unhurried. Steed mentally braced himself for the cold air, turned the knob, and pushed the door open just a little. In the dark he could see that there were women on the step, and so, confident there was no great threat, he opened the door all the way out towards them.

There were three of them, standing there without offering greeting. The one in front was sort of comely, though her blonde hair was done in an odd way that Still thought made her look slovenly and low. The two behind her were a fair bit older, one of them with big wide eyes that looked sad and hungry at the same time, framed by thick, heavy lashes. The one beside her had black hair that hung so far down, Still could not ascertain the end of it at all.

They were barefoot beneath the hems of their plain cotton dresses, and Still was about to chide them about the madness of that in this cold when the one in front held something up to him in her delicate right hand. It was a box almost as long as her forearm, tied with a yellow bow. Not a word yet from any of them.

Who's this meant for? Still asked, but there was no response except a nod towards him from the one with the stunningly long hair. Still saw that the woman with the striking lashes was actually holding the end of her companion's hair tight in her own hand so that it did not scrape across the wooden planks of the doorstep and come to harm or cause the woman to stumble, like a bridesmaid protecting the loose ends of a wedding dress. The clump of hair dangled downward a full twelve or eighteen inches out of her grip.

Still took the box and set the lantern down on the floor for a moment. Its feeble rays lit the women from below and their faces were plunged back into shadow. Just sober enough to feel the first flutter of suspicion in his gut, Still nevertheless undid the bow and lifted the top of the long box. What he saw there confused but mesmerized him.

It was a paintbrush. Not just any one, but the exact one he had been looking at in a specialty catalog of such things that he had written away in the mail for some months before. Made of hog hair, with a strong ferrule that flattened the brush tight so he could make his grasses and branches more fine.

I don't understand, he said to these women, and unable to resist lifting the beautiful brush from the box, he started to do so.

The moment his fingers touched the wooden handle, a wet grunting sound clapped through the kitchen as Still's body erupted, scattering every part of himself outward in all directions, coating the walls and ceiling with burning and smoking bits of bone and other biology. Mostly the tiny fires were snuffed out instantaneously by the shower of blood that accompanied the eruption, but some remnants remained hot enough to bubble—though there would be no greater burning of the kind Corbin Nin had offered the town elders. Still was there one second, spread out into a meaningless nothing the next. One window had cracked where a flaming part of his hip had struck it.

All was again quiet in the kitchen, and on the doorstep, and throughout the house. The women stood briefly outside after the faint echoes of Still's death passed into the floorboards and crevices and vents, and then they turned and walked away.

The decrepit barn that the property's previous owner of six decades, Thomas Combs, had intended to tear down throughout the last decade of his life still stood sixty yards across the back field, though it was essentially empty now. Quaking aspens protected it on either side, one of them bearing chop marks where Combs had, many years ago, actually started the process of levelling the land before his weak heart forced him into bed for weeks.

The barn had no doors anymore. The three barefoot women approached that cavern of shadows and spiders at a pace so slow they might have appeared to an onlooker to be sleepwalking. They remained aligned in their tight triangle as they moved, the blonde one slightly out ahead, and the second tenderly holding the hair of the third above the frozen earth.

A muddy swath of yellow light marked the dirt just inside the barn. The women stopped before it. Sometime since leaving the back step of the Ebbit house, the one in front had somehow produced another gift, holding it up for offer before there was anyone there to accept it. This box was considerably smaller, the bow appearing silvery in the dark.

Inside the barn, Nora Ebbit lay slumped against a pair of thick goosedown pillows resting on the dirt. The lantern she had set beside her showed the visitors that her eyes were open but unmoving, and her lower jaw hung down strangely, as if weighted. A wine glass lay toppled beside her. The strychnine she had ingested had caused gray froth to coat her lips and leak down onto the front of her housecoat. The last spasms of her muscles had caused her to kick away a short, wrathful note she had left behind for her husband. The heel of her foot had managed to rip the note in two, but it was still legible.

The women waited for her to stir. Not for just one minute, but for several, standing there, motionless, the gentle wind weaving through their hair. Nora Ebbit's gift was then withdrawn, its purpose having already been served, and they turned away from the barn to move on.

At ten past eleven, Brian Carpenter rose from his bed in his little bachelor's house on Bannister Lane to seek out the bottle of medicinal schnapps he kept in the sideboard. It had been so long since he'd pulled off the top that the stickiness had fused it almost permanently to the container. He took a glass of the stuff to his window, and when he looked out and saw a shape moving down the road out there, he almost dropped it.

Lord God, he whispered in terror, you are my hiding place, and under your wings I can always find refuge. Protect me from trouble wherever I go, and keep evil far from me.

But the shape, flattened to two dimensions because of the old postman's visual handicap, was only the illusion of people out there under the moon, people walking. Instead what Brian was really

seeing in the almost total dark was a horse. It moved slowly, confused and uncertain. It had gone free from someone's stable, that was clear, but he had no way of knowing whose. It was simply... out. Now it stopped on the road and looked around as if waiting for someone to bring reason to it. Brian would not go out there. It was that kind of night, when even the beasts in Porto suddenly felt an unknown threat out there somewhere and acted out in fear.

Brian's hands were trembling. He set the glass down on the sill and shuffled back to his bed. So he never saw Naulus Ebbit walk past his window twenty minutes later. Brian had by then drawn the covers entirely over his head for the first time since he was a little kid, becoming the kind of coward he had felt like most of his life: the kind who would lie for decades about how he'd lost his eye, always claiming one undaunted moment of rebellion or moral outrage or another, making him seem so much braver than he really was, his story always changing, making him ridiculous to others. It simply felt so good sometimes to seem to stand for something, and talk like it. He didn't mean any harm by it.

The liquor put him out quickly. With his passage into unconsciousness, not a human soul remained awake in Porto, save for Naulus Ebbit. From his suddenly horror-stricken home on Cherry Road, Ebbit walked all the way into the center of town in a daze. He had awoken tonight and gotten up to look for his wife, for she had never come to bed at all, which happened more and more often after their arguments. He had spent the time since the pulsing nightmare of discovery that had followed exiled to the road, not knowing where he was going or whose arms he might eventually collapse into. The bitter cold's assault on his extremities became painful quickly, but its needles and bruising fingers were the only thing keeping his mind from completely collapsing in on itself. The pain gave him something outside himself to react to.

Trampier Road was where St. Bridget was, he knew, so he tried to find his way there, becoming confused in the dark at both of the crossroads where he was required to make a decision. But he somehow guessed right, and in the end, he made it all the way to the silent hulk of Temperance Hall, tears frozen on his cheeks, his right foot throbbing after a faulty step into a depression he could not see. That was where he stopped, because someone was walking toward him from the other direction. Three people, it looked like, though he had never been out in such a murky night where everything he saw seemed made of pure black.

The three women who met him near Temperance Hall seemed to have their own light around them somehow, so that he could see them clearly, see their faces, which if not precisely kind, at least held no anger for him, no more pain. He opened his mouth to plead for help, but the only word that came out was his wife's name.

To this, the women had no reply. The one in front held something up before her, pushing her right arm out gently towards him. There was something clenched in her fingers, which themselves seemed to conjure an impossibly soft blue radiance.

Ebbit took one more step toward them to peer at what was being offered. His breath hitched when he saw what it was. A camel made crudely of cloth and sawdust, with buttons for eyes. He recognized it at once. The doll his grandmother had given him for his fifth birthday and that he had lost almost immediately on a family train trip through Baltimore, so ashamed he had wept when he told her.

Needing no explanation for its presence in that outstretched hand, because now he understood this awful night was all a dream and he would soon wake up, he reached forward to take the gift from this wonderful stranger. The doll felt inexplicably warm to the touch. An instant later there was a dreadful alien sound, then a burp of orange light as a single lick of bloody flame burst through Ebbit's mouth, and his body's contents were splashed on the steps of Temperance Hall and even the side of St. Bridget Church. His scalp, his eyes, his feet, smoking slivers of his heart were fanned out all over Trampier Road. The women watched impassively.

It was seven minutes to midnight. The women were gone by the time the blood stopped flowing, its progress in all directions quickly halted by the cold. The horse that had wandered free from William Rice's property because he had forgotten, in his haste to get indoors, to lock the gate, came clopping down Trampier at a quarter past twelve, still both afraid of and captivated by the nighttime world beyond what it knew. Pierre the Second walked through the unrecognizable remains of Naulus Ebbit and mounted the steps of the church, leaving bloody prints. He sensed a light in there, but though he waited, no one came out to comfort him. Pierre would not be found and brought safely home for another sixteen hours.

By then, William Rice and Dan Hagen and Doctor Tennyson and others had come and cleaned the road as best they could as many in Porto watched, and they did the same in the kitchen of the Ebbit house, and Elizabeth Sherwood took the children away and fed them and arranged for them to be brought back to Detroit. Nora Ebbit's body was taken there too. The remains of the men and their torn and burned clothing, as well as the gifts they left behind, were gathered as much as possible and brought to Father Post for possible burial.

The ground is so hard, he told William Rice. And so to Rosary Glen the priest walked that night alone, carrying a sack that contained it all, tucking it into a special secret place for now, for now. He ever so briefly considered going beyond the church cemetery to say a prayer over the three graves that lay in the woods, but in the end, he only returned home.

In his heart, Thomas Post believed this town where his grandfather had come from Ireland to preach the word of God would survive only three or perhaps four more generations. Already industry-minded people were coming and building hard and fast everywhere in the name of progress. Old ways would not survive that sort of noisy revolution, and strange and terrible things could no longer be kept secret in this new age when information and ideas, good and bad, travelled so swiftly. Ghosts did not have much longer to walk unnoticed.

Father Post was right about the tide of progress. It came in earnest shortly after he passed away, and it removed Porto entirely from the face of the earth. The three strange graves in Rosary Glen, as well as the entire acreage of woods that had once sheltered the wooden sign on which young Raymond Still had painted a hanging man, were removed with it.

D.N.K.

DIRECTOR

Good evening everyone, my name is Leonard Terry and you are listening to the DVD commentary track for my 2021 documentary film *D.N.K.*, as we listen here to the end of the opening credit music...

The first question I am always asked when the movie screens at festivals is of course, how did you come to choose this topic? And it's very simple, really: The Droditch scares me. That's as honest a thing as I can say. After all the stories I've heard as a filmmaker over twenty years about strange happenings and events that people have told me about, travelling all over and even witnessing some disturbing things, it's none of that that scares me, but the Droditch does. It's the Droditch I think about whenever I have to walk across an empty parking lot to my car late at night, or whenever I got just a little far out on the nature trail near my house in Suffolk County, New York, and the light begins to fade.

It took almost a year of off-and-on efforts to get everyone in this film to agree to go on camera, so there was research that never seemed to end, and then finally in November of 2019 things finally fell into place. We see here the first scene: I wanted to open the film with my drive to see this man Donald Kokoschka, because it was the opportunity to open it with just a little levity, there's an absurdist element to this for me. I had been warned by the attorney for Triad Pact Pictures that Kokoschka was likely to pull a reversal on us; he was apparently an unpleasant man *before* the Saturday Ministry Incident, and it made him even colder, but of course I had to try, since he was one of only four survivors of that day, easily the oldest. No matter his attitude we had to try. And I wanted to show just how far we had to drive into south Jersey to get to him.

And this is of course all real; I told my cameraperson Trish Wilkens to just follow me up onto the porch here and capture everything, and when Donald Kokoschka opened the door, we have this drama here...

DIRECTOR

We agreed to every part of what you—

DONALD

I never signed anything with you. So what you do is you take your camera, and you send it right to hell. And if you ever call me again, I'll take you to court!

DIRECTOR

That's fine, we're not putting you under any obligation to share anything you don't want to—

DONALD

You *are* putting me under an obligation by *calling* me. If I have to—

DIRECTOR

It wasn't just—we called pretty much everybody we could to—

DONALD

If I have to pick up the phone and hear *that word*, even *one time* out of your mouth, you're obligating me! I guess you're too dense to figure that out!

DIRECTOR

I do love that thing he says about "sending the camera to hell."

I was really more stunned than anything else that he had drawn us out there with the promise of telling his story only to kick us out before we even got inside. I didn't mind being called—and here that line is right here—I didn't mind being called a Hollywood ghoul trying to profit from tragedy, because I've been called that before, even though I've technically never been there, but that was a hell of a long drive, like two hours. So we do not get to hear Mr. Kokoschka's account of what happened that day in 2002.

So then we move on to Noah DiLeo. He was the first to agree to cooperate with us and go on camera. At the time of this interview which begins here, he was working for Travelers Insurance in their I.T. department. I was really surprised by how young he looked, I actually had to do the math in my head, I almost thought I had the wrong Noah DiLeo for a second. He had just turned seventeen when the Droditch came. Very nice guy, his interview took about two days, of which we see only about nine minutes in the finished film.

Now, what you can't tell from the interviews on the screen is that I had been coached very well by a psychologist, Dr. Elizabeth Calvo, about how to talk to survivors of catastrophe. I had done it before for my doctoral film project and botched it.

Noah had just been promoted at work the day before we began, he had ordered this shirt he has on here special. Our D.P. was not a fan of the pattern, he gave me the stare of death, but we didn't say anything to Noah.

Here we have Noah and I going back and forth about this seemingly insignificant detail about the weather on April 27, 2002, whether it rained a little or not... an anecdote that didn't make it into the final cut was about how he had been put in charge of the refreshments that day for the Saturday Ministry meeting by one of the counselors, which had been a very big deal for him, he took it very seriously, and he was worried about the food getting wet bringing it into the building from Maeve Tavares's station wagon, but I did want to show how memories differ so greatly, there are so many conflicting reports about even something like the weather on April 27th.

When I first mention Lisa Whitelaw to him here, that's the very first time I'd mentioned her name to him, even when we were arranging these interviews, and I thought I might get some kind of reaction here, but no, you can see his reaction is just simple fondness about hearing the name again. A lot of people who see the movie are really moved by this little story he tells of how it was his first date and that he sort of wound up accidentally asking Lisa on it one day at church because she essentially misheard him, there too many people standing around talking at once and the next thing he knew, he had a date with this beautiful girl. But it was really was an adorable date as you hear

him describe here, like something out of a teen coming-of-age movie, even more G-rated than a John Hughes, where Noah took the bus across town from one direction and Lisa took one from the other, and they just talked about the movie afterwards in the lobby and bought another tub of popcorn because they didn't really know what to do then, they were such good kids, well-behaved by every account. And then I like the part where he says he missed the bus home because he was so nervous. And they didn't see each other again till the morning of the 27th, two days later, when it all happened.

We cut here for somewhat dramatic effect. This diagram you see here of the annex where the Saturday Ministry used to meet, which is connected to Proud Lake Baptist, was done by my assistant Ben. I wanted to get the viewer inside that building mentally as soon as possible and always thinking about it while watching the movie, so despite the fact that I had already asked Noah many questions about that day, the first significant one you hear me speak in the film is this one: where he and Lisa found themselves in the moment when the Droditch came.

He doesn't go much into it here, but this was a common motif of the meetings of the Saturday Ministry, which had about twenty people from town in 2002, a mix of adults and teenagers. They would meet Saturday morning in spring and summer and go about the business of helping the church in whatever way was on the docket.

DIRECTOR

I don't get, um... how did you wind up on opposite sides of the building?

NOAH

We got split into two groups, and both groups had a problem to solve. We had to figure out how to, ah... get more seniors involved in the church. That was my group. And the group Lisa was in had something to do with beautifying the nursery school part, there was a garden back there, I think. That was going to be the first half of the day, the problem solving. And then we'd get together and talk about it and chow down.

DIRECTOR

And that part never happened because...

NOAH

Right.

DIRECTOR

But did the groups always have to go to completely opposite parts of the building?

NOAH

No, that was different that day. We usually just went next door, but there was some kind of painting going on that weekend, so the whole annex was kind of a mess. So I looked up and Lisa was heading out the door with seven or eight other people. I waved goodbye, but she didn't see me.

DIRECTOR

There was no room for it in the film, but the day that Mavis—Mavis Morley my producer—and I went to Proud Lake Baptist for the first time, it really was a revelation visually, and it so demonstrated why you really need as a filmmaker to go to a place instead of just poring through archival photos and videos. It jumped out how Proud Lake Baptist's complex was basically the shape of a blocky letter C, like a square with one side open, so what happened was... Noah DiLeo was on one side at 10:20 a.m., and across the grassy little quad, Lisa Whitelaw was on the other side, there are big windows running all along, wrapping all the way around. So Noah could actually look across and see the room she and the other people from group number two were in if he wanted. I mean, the place had to be rebuilt, but the layout remained exactly the same, so he would have seen so much, especially if it was overcast and the sun wasn't creating a lot of shadows. We actually tested that.

And then you can see right away in this slow pan across the street how far away 120 Cherry Road is. Rand Street beside it is really wide, but reading the various accounts of April 27th and even seeing the news footage made it seem like the buildings were right up against each other. That just wasn't true. The street is wide, it's always been wide, and there's a parking lot that had to be crossed, the same way it's here in the film, that hasn't changed in eighteen years. But only one person saw the actual crossing of the Droditch from 120 Cherry to Proud Lake Baptist, only one person, nobody else, say, in a car going past. Nobody else saw that movement, except Yuko Aratama. Which is incredible, and that really made it sink in for us just how fast everything happened.

Archival footage:

MAYOR

Hello, and welcome to Atlas, New Jersey. If you've ever thought that the quiet and comfort of small town living couldn't go hand in hand with the benefits of city life, think again. Year after year, Atlas is voted one of the state's best places to live, and I'll show you all the reasons why in this video. I should know... I'm the mayor!

DIRECTOR

The mayor, Leigh Cosmatos, is the director of the Atlas Community Playhouse now; her political career was not long.

Which leads us to Bill Savoy, the original owner of the building at 120 Cherry Road. The interviews with him were done in this ugly little break room here inside the train station where he works now, you can actually see an Amtrak go by at one point later. And remember this is a guy who back in 2002 was worth something like five million dollars. And it really is all gone, I assure you, the civil suits against him took everything he had. Something else that is not shown in *D.N.K.* is the difference in appearance that Bill underwent between 2002 and 2020 when we shot this, which is striking. Photographs couldn't quite capture it, it's like he aged thirty-five years instead of eighteen.

This real estate crookedness he's talking about here that he was engaging in at the time of the Saturday Ministry incident does have a name, actually, it's called bullfighting. The more 120 Cherry

fell apart, the more it would actually benefit Bill's company financially because it put pressure on the developers to give him a good price before the county stepped in and ruined a deal. So what a dubious landlord will do is, he'll do the absolute minimum of repairs and just let a building fall apart physically, which in the case of 120 Cherry had been going on for about five years, to the point where it was barely passing inspections, but it wasn't costing Bill anything. By playing the long game, the landlord just sits back and watches the value of the land go up. There's no financial incentive to do upkeep as long as he knows the land is getting more and more valuable.

I got a lot of mail when the documentary was released saying, *How can you put this man on screen, why does he get to tell his story just like the real survivors of that day, the actual heroes, even after he was found liable?* But you can see even on the screen here, I think, his regret and his shame, it was like rust on his spirit. We found out that he never even challenged any of the lawsuits against him, he agreed to every term outright. So to me it's a case of people needing a convenient villain.

DIRECTOR

I know the courts might have eventually said that yeah, the conditions at 120 contributed to what happened, but were the conditions in there really so perfect that it was the only place around that would—

BILL

I think so, yeah. It was a very specific set of conditions, or so I was told.

DIRECTOR

If your name comes back into public discussion, because of this film...

BILL

That's OK, because what I want to give you is a confession. I want to make it totally clear that I accept blame for my part of it.

Different scene:

DIRECTOR

What was your relation to Maeve Tavares?

MARY

She was my spiritual counselor, basically.

DIRECTOR

OK, so here's Mary Neary, kind of the heart of the story, for me, the heart of the documentary. I had tried to persuade her via email to talk to me for about ten months, no dice, and then one morning she called me on her cell. She was lying in the back seat of her car at a rest stop just down the road from her house, she was still a little drunk from the night before. She had to drag herself to work with a hangover, she taught fifth grade. Her school closed early the day before so the staff could attend the funeral of a student who'd drowned. It seems like that had triggered some really bad stuff in her. She told me very frankly she just really needed the money, she was facing foreclosure, so once that payment to her was approved, we had all the survivors.

Mary was the one I was really worried about psychologically. She's a very polite woman, calm, she lived in this little house where we did the interview. She liked to take artwork she found in thrift stores and make jigsaw puzzles out of it, give those away as presents. She was only thirty-four when the film was made but you can see on the screen, and it's not just the iffy lighting in her kitchen, she seems a fair bit older. Made no secret of her drinking. Made no secret that she was bored, lonely, and carrying around a tremendous case of survivor guilt. She was sixteen when the incident happened. It had happened about three miles from where she was living when we filmed.

On that first day with Mary, we had to go through more territory than I wanted to because really I was just worried she wasn't going to last through many more rounds of this, so by day's end I was kind of wiped out. I guess I'll compare it to when you're driving in a heavy snowfall, you know, leaning forward, your focus and your worry are so acute minute after minute that when you finally get to your driveway, you feel beaten up, you've got that tension headache. That's what it was like interviewing Mary.

Here now is a photo of Maeve Tavares. She was the one who told Mary at about 10:15 in the room there that she was going to run down the road and pick up one of the adults who hadn't been able to get a lift to Proud Baptist, just go get in her car and come right back in maybe twenty minutes. And she left the room and she never actually got out of the building. The doors on that side melted about sixty seconds later. That's where they found her, but they needed dental records to make the identification.

DIRECTOR

I get that you didn't see the moment of entry, but do you recall anything about the sounds when it first became obvious that something really bad was happening, the sounds from the hallway?

MARY

Yeah, Velcro. You know when you undo a piece of Velcro, you ever have Velcro shoes as a kid, you know what that sounds like?

DIRECTOR

Sure.

MARY

That's what it sounded like when it got into the room, but kind of wet, and incredibly loud. That's what it sounded like.

DIRECTOR

This conversation was the first hour we spoke. You can see how defensive her body language is, very coiled, sitting very upright. Just offscreen to her right, very strategically eliminated from the frame, is a bottle of scotch which she kept nearby. She keep drinking from it little by little over the course of three hours. You'd never know it, the level just kept going down and down.

DIRECTOR

Noah was telling me about your date, your accidental date that he accidentally asked you out on.

LISA

He was super sweet.

DIRECTOR

You didn't really keep in touch so much beyond like a year after the incident?

LISA

No.

DIRECTOR

Different schools, I guess.

LISA

Just wasn't meant to be.

DIRECTOR

Went to see a movie, right?

DIRECTOR

And finally the last survivor of the Saturday Ministry Incident, Lisa Whitelaw. Still has that very all-American look eighteen years after the incident. We didn't mean for her hair to look so blonde and radiant on film with the light coming through that window behind her, it just happened. This discussion of movie popcorn we have here just went on and on because I wasn't sure how to segue into her memories of the day of the disaster. It started when I asked her about seeing the movie with Noah two nights before, and off we went in a very friendly way about our preferences in movie theater popcorn, which was a nice way to interview her but it didn't exactly lead to stirring cinema, so all that was snipped.

OFFICER EAKINS

We wanted to sort of visually set down a track to reconstruct the creature's movements from the street all the way through the building. And we weren't sure how we were gonna do it, so I brought

this big canvas bag of my son's blocks... each one was about six inches around. We spent an hour lining them all up in one long path. And in the morning I put them back in the bag and took them home and gave them back to Christopher. No explanation. I don't think I ever told him what we did.

DIRECTOR

None of the survivors we show in *D.N.K.*, excluding Donald Kokoschka, lived more than fifteen miles from Proud Lake Baptist, even eighteen years later.

When we first arrived in town—I'd never been there—we came by car, myself, Ben and Mavis, it was a very gray day, it was so gray we had the headlights on even though it wasn't raining, and I could feel something as we passed the sign on the side of the road that says Welcome to Atlas, with the Elks logo and such. I felt this weird negative energy sort of creep up my spine, a totally psychosomatic thing, but in that moment I wondered, *My God, why do these people still live anywhere near here?* Atlas lost about ten percent of its population in the three years after what happened in 2002, completely opposite of the trend of all the surrounding towns. But these people did not leave.

Dr. Calvo also reminded me, she said *If you can, try not to say the word for the thing that attacked, use the word "it" if you can, "it" will make it easier for them*, so you can see me trying to do that in these interviews as best as I could, but there are times when it doesn't sound natural at all. I think that when Donald Kokoschka made a reference to that "one word," I think that's probably what he meant.

DIRECTOR

Was there ever really any time to think about anyone else, like the police coming or someone coming from another part of the building, or were you just reacting frantically to what was happening? It wasn't like, "Oh, if I can hang on, cower down, maybe someone will come"?

LISA

I don't remember any conscious thought about anything.

DIRECTOR

But Noah did come, before the police coordinated and made their move.

LISA

Yeah. I think someone else did try, but it killed him.

DIRECTOR

Would you say Noah saved your life?

LISA

Absolutely he did. How's he doing?

DIRECTOR

Now here is this extraordinary footage... this is the kind of thing Hollywood could never re-create, this grainy handheld video from the night *after* the attack. This isn't a police video, this is the video an insurance investigator took. And it's going to take us into the building at 120 Cherry Road, just across Rand Street from Proud Lake Baptist, and I don't know why this video was taken at night; I think they probably wanted to show how dark it would have been in there and how the lights weren't working. You just saw the crack in the west exterior wall there as the cameraperson moved past it. It was still a while before they understood the significance of it. A vermin inspector had removed a scaffolding that was sort of temporarily sealing that crack, and no one had replaced it. It was that simple, how something could have then gotten into and through that space with nobody seeing.

Now here you can see how dark this first floor area is. No emergency lights are on, even though the light mounted on this person's camera sometimes spots the housing where those lights are. Again, if only those exit lights had been on, there would not have been this state of utter darkness, and maybe that alone would have been enough to make the environment inside this big empty building undesirable. Bill Savoy remembers being forced when he was twenty-eight to watch this footage, by some attorney who apparently said to him, *You created a home for that thing.*

We're in a small boiler room here I guess you'd call it, and then the camera moves into this flight of stairs. In this footage, we will see the camera go through two doors, and someone at Sundance said to me after a screening, Well, how did the Droditch get to the fifth floor, the top floor, through those doors? But as you just saw, it was a simple push bar mechanism that anyone or anything could figure out fast enough.

Now we are on the fifth floor, the camera pans here, just like the director of a narrative film would do, even though this is just an insurance document really... we take in totally empty space in all directions, cement floor, you can see how attractive this environment would have been... and then the final piece in the puzzle maybe was this standing water all over that had been leaking in through the roof. It was never proven that the storm six nights earlier had caused this leak. It was judged more likely than not that it did, so maybe if that storm had never happened and there was no available sustaining water source, the attack would never have occurred.

What is so striking about all this footage is that you never hear anyone behind the camera, so it was likely just one person alone in this building at night, documenting all these little bits of evidence of neglect, walking through the dark with this light mounted on the camera. I don't think anyone knows who the cameraperson was.

The camera just sort of wanders through the dark here. So much space, no junked furniture or anything, it was a floor that was never used. And here the mounted light will go out for just a moment and you see the reddish night sky through that window near where the water had been collecting on the floor, and that ambient light in the sky when this was taken would actually have been coming from the beacons the emergency crews had set up to clean up the wreckage of Proud Lake Baptist next door, about thirty-six hours after the attack.

Mary again, this was maybe the hardest stretch of her interview:

DIRECTOR

You never thought about moving away, some other town?

MARY

It's hard to start over somewhere else where you don't know anybody. You have to find a job...

DIRECTOR

Can you talk about the, sort of, geography of your last position inside the gym before they found you?

MARY

I'd call it more of a rec room, there was a little bit of fitness equipment in there, not much.

DIRECTOR

Yeah, sorry, inaccurate word. Here on this map here... on the left there's another classroom, and it's technically closer. You didn't run for that? Was it closed?

DIRECTOR

The rec room was just the first place Mary saw, it wasn't even a flip of a coin for her, it was just seeing a door in the chaos and she went for it. She wasn't following anybody and nobody was following her; she assumed everyone was dead who didn't go back down the other way, down the hallway. She saw about six or seven people running. I got very confused here by the logistics of that moment but I didn't want to press her on that. What I've always assumed is that she was in that spot I was pointing to on the map on the screen there, and the people she saw were on the other side of the Droditch, and the Droditch was between them, so she was totally cut off from them, no real hope.

Now, we cut away here because Mary blacked out. We panicked, she was out for about thirty seconds, just blacked out in her chair right at the end of a sentence, and when she came around, she told us that this just happened sometimes and it wasn't a big deal. In the end we had to go mostly with what Mary told police back in 2002, which was fragmented even then.

We had a problem of how to present this visually with her memory being so unreliable, so we decided to do this in montage, showing the actual words on the actual pages of testimony. Some people could say it kind of goes against the concept of film being a visual medium; I would argue that these twelve or thirteen shots of the black ink on this white paper, this visibly aging paper, showing these words, are *intensely* visual.

This photo that we cut to, you can see that all that was in the room she escaped to in that moment was a stack of pilate mats and a couple of treadmills. Mary ran for that little closet area we highlighted which didn't even have a door, and she crouched behind a vacuum cleaner. This was her defense, and then immediately the door blew open, you can see the door lying on the floor very briefly.

In these photos from 2002 we see on the screen now, you don't even really see the full extent of the burns she got on her face and neck. The distance from her spot in that one corner and the door was about twenty feet, but in talking to investigators, they were able to confirm that even that would have been the equivalent of standing over an open oven set to about five hundred degrees. And the Droditch came closer from there.

DIRECTOR
And then you saw it.

MARY
Yeah.

DIRECTOR
How close did it get?

MARY
Ten feet...

DIRECTOR
Ten feet.

MARY
About that.

DIRECTOR
Do me a favor if you can. Can you close your eyes, and then think about when it first saw you, and then count the seconds before it turned and moved back out of the room, and then tell me how long there was eye contact, in your estimation.

MARY
No, I don't want to do that.

DIRECTOR
That's OK.

MARY
I'll tell you, because I think I know. I just don't want to close my eyes.

DIRECTOR
Fair enough.

MARY
Eight seconds.

DIRECTOR
Eight full seconds.

MARY

Actual seconds, yeah, not some estimation.

DIRECTOR

1 ... 2 ... 3... 4... 5... 6... 7... 8.

DIRECTOR

So the debate has gone on for twenty years now, why the Droditch hesitated with Mary and then retreated, Mary and no one else. There's never been any evidence of hesitation with anyone else. And I didn't want to clog up the film with those theories because it takes us too far away from the people the story is about, so we shot interviews on that topic... we shot them at Rutgers University, we shot them at Loyola... maybe they'll be extras on this DVD, I don't know... but in the end, I just never heard anything convincing.

Really the most convincing theory remains the eye color theory. Mary would have fallen into that grouping, but it's so terrible how little evidence we have even now, twenty-two years after the Droditch's first attack and through the six that came since, that the eye color theory still doesn't have nearly enough weight or data to it to prove anything. Or the solo kill aversion, which is another possibility that some experts have floated.

In the end, though, it was Mary herself who told me off-camera that she simply felt she was cursed. I'll never forget her saying that, at the end of her driveway. At the time I thought that was a throwaway comment, I barely gave it a second thought. And then about a month later when we found out what we did about what happened to her in France years after the Saturday Ministry incident, then that comment came back to me, and it was given a very profound meaning.

I need to take a break here, and I don't think I should talk over this clip, which is from the very first recorded attack: the Chain of Rocks Water Treatment Plant outside St. Louis in December 1999.

(We hear a structure beginning to tremble, then ultimately collapse. There is an animalistic shrieking sound, then a natural rattling mixed with screams as dozens of people scatter.)

DIRECTOR

OK, welcome back. We're picking up a little later in the film. I have to confess, I've had a couple of drinks before recording this stretch of commentary, because this stretch here, especially with the Lisa stuff, has always gotten to me in a very simple gut-punch kind of way. But let's pick up with a stretch of interviews beginning here with Yuko Aratama, the woman who was the first to see something emerging from 120 Cherry that morning, April 27th, at just about 10:20.

Yuko is standing here right at the intersection where she'd been back in 2002, waiting for a bus. There's no context here, but Yuko had just flown to America for the first time. She was an exchange student, she was starting her work on her master's in civil engineering, she had come to Atlas to

stay with a cousin. They'd never even met, April 27th was Yuko's fourth day in America. Over the end credits we will see her pencil rendering of what she saw lurching across the road. She did not actually create this rendering until just five years ago. At age twenty-one, which she was in 2002, she said she had no artistic talent whatsoever, she said she took up sketching a year after the attack, and she's never been sure whether it was maybe that morning of April 27th that stirred something in her, something that needed to be expressed in some way that she didn't yet have within her. And she still sketches today.

And here's Lisa again, and I need more drinkies, just a sec...

I have to keep telling myself, even today, how little she and Noah DiLeo really knew each other, just a couple of conversations in church, and then the one date, and the next time they saw each other, not even any time to catch up. They got to the Saturday Ministry at Proud Lake Baptist and were almost immediately in separate rooms, such a long way between them. So it has always seemed unthinkable to me what Noah did. I think of myself at that age, sixteen, and how wrapped up in myself I was, and I can't seem to make any connection between this kid, Noah, and even the adult I am now.

I talked to his parents briefly, they didn't want to go on camera. I think I was trying to uncover that thing that was inside him that sent him out into that center quad, out of the classroom where he seemed safe, out of there through a window, onto that grassy quad, alone and exposed, because he knew Lisa was over there, and for no other reason. It's not built into our nature at that age to go towards death, not if you're a teenager in New Jersey who likes building models and playing kickball, and there's no other way to interpret the timeline and the maps and the photographs, that Noah knew what he was risking. There were so many people already dead, he could see the fire spreading. But he went and he got through the window on that side and he saw what he saw and he acted. This was a kid who at ten o'clock was so worried that he might screw up bringing those refreshments in, he was thinking, *Oh my gosh, did I buy enough ice, is the ice for the sodas melting too fast, did I not bring enough non-sugary stuff because we have two diabetics?* Same kid.

We cut back and forth here for a bit, between Noah and Lisa, and now for the first time we take the camera inside the rebuilt Proud Lake Baptist complex mixed with some home videos we obtained of what everything looked like between about 1992 and 1999.

I remember Noah would give us trail mix when we interviewed him, iced tea and trail mix, it's funny the things you remember about people. I would look around his apartment in this anonymous complex, and I would get inexplicably sad, and at night I would go home and I would think, *Of course they should be together today, it's they who should be married to each other... why shouldn't one beautiful little thing have come out of this instead of them never having even a second date, and Lisa getting married to someone else, why does it have to be this way and not that way?* I came to rationalize it for my own peace of mind by looking at it like, *Well, they now had the kind of bond that can never be broken, maybe that's the narrative I can live with. It wasn't meant to be that they should keep dating and fall in love, maybe that was too normal, it was meant that they have something else that's unseen and unending and mysterious.*

DIRECTOR

Did you know your arm was broken?

NOAH

No, it was numb.

DIRECTOR

Didn't look down at it?

NOAH

Maybe I did. I don't remember.

DIRECTOR

A camper in Nanticoke, Maryland recorded this December, 2016:

(He presses Play, and we hear a rainstorm out in nature. The camper is heard unzipping his tent, and the night is heard more clearly. He is heard saying "Shhhhh..." to someone.

After several seconds, we hear an animal screech, almost exactly like the one from the St. Louis tape. There is silence except for the rain, and then, finally, a gunshot from far away.)

DIRECTOR

To have two separate twists, I guess you'd call them, during the filming, especially of a documentary, was something I had never experienced. Mary's came first. We're seeing here the second day of interviews, and she was very definitely hung over. We weren't getting very far here, it was not a very good day as I tried to get a few more details from her about what it was like to see the Droditch so close and live to tell about it. And as I recall, it was that night that Ben called me up, he'd just been continuing some very conventional background research on everyone we show in the film, nothing terribly invasive, and an old friend of Mary's from back then—who I think didn't like her very much, I'll keep his name confidential—said to Ben, "Well you know about Didier Souza, right?" And Ben hadn't, neither one of us had. This was something she'd kept from us, not an outright lie, she just didn't want to pull that name out from the past, understandably. She'd changed her name in 2004 and the French police and the French courts had gone to considerable length to keep her identity secret. So as we talk to her on the screen here, I don't know yet about this chapter of her life.

Watching the movie now, to me it's obvious how distressed she was here. I look at her eyes and I know she was in the grips of something very dark, but to her credit she's here and she's answering my questions and she talks about what one of the victims was screaming as he tried to run away, and originally we thought of naming the film that terrible phrase he was screaming, right down to the broken grammar: *There's a Monster Got in the Room*, but Mary told us later this day, after we stopped shooting, that she couldn't be sure that's what the words were exactly, so we decided against it.

So yes, Ben found out about Didier Souza, and now here we are, this is the exterior of Centre Pénitentiaire du Kef in Brittany, France, sorry about the pronunciation. This is absolutely the last place in the world I thought we'd wind up shooting this documentary. This day's footage was shot, ah, actually it was the very last shot we ever got for the film, this exterior.

I had never been inside a women's prison before, much less in France, and the location of Kef prison is especially strange, it's on the former site of the largest mental hospital in the country until it closed in 1954, the land and the old building looked down on the town from a hill in a very intimidating way. Then when the region needed a location to build the new women's prison, they chose that exact spot, high on the hill, it's a small building in the center courtyard within the walls of the former mental hospital, that's how big it was. And I can't really put into words how dire the atmosphere in that prison is. It's an awful place to be.

Ernestine Souza was twenty-four when she was convicted. She had been in Kef prison for more than four years by this time. In May of 2014, a group of American and Canadian tourists in Toulouse had registered through their hotel to go on a day hiking trip in the countryside, a very common thing. They all went together in a van, six people total, including the driver from the hotel. When they got to a small parking area in the woods, there was one other vehicle there and three people immediately got out of it. This was Didier Souza and his brother and his sister, and they abducted the group. Drove the van more than an hour away, marched them out through the woods to the struggling family farm.

This was a ransom scheme. Didier's older brother Dom had been arrested two years before for burglary and assault and he had then died in prison, but what was left of the Souza family, who had all been living together on the farm for several years, they did not believe he had died in prison, they insisted that Dom had in fact been taken away to a secret base somewhere in France as part of a secret program to impregnate humans with alien spawn. This was their belief. They demanded that Dom be returned to them or their American and Canadian captives would be killed. By most accounts, Didier's younger sister and younger brother had been relatively stable people, they had no conflicts with the law all their lives until he moved back onto the farm after their parents' death, and slowly they seemed to fall under the spell of his extreme beliefs and in the end, his complete insanity.

The hostage situation stretched on for six days in November of 2014, it was a very famous situation in France. The press of course had a field day with it, but they didn't understand then how dark and deranged Didier really was.

On the sixth day, when it was obvious he wasn't going to get what he wanted and they had been located and cut off, he ordered his younger brother Luc and his sister Ernestine to take the hostages individually into the woods and kill them. Ernestine refused and snuck off the farm. She intended to find the police and help them intervene.

One person who was chosen to live—who was actually let go to make her way through the countryside; all she had to promise not to tell anyone where they were—was the woman who had been inexplicably spared in the Saturday Ministry incident: Mary Neary.

(Throughout the following exchange, an interpreter acts as a go-between, translating English into French and vice versa.)

DIRECTOR

I want to ask you about the list Didier had made, the list of names and these designations beside them. What did the numbers mean?

ERNESTINE

It was the order that I was told to do it. Didier was worried about some more than others, so he said to do it in a certain order.

DIRECTOR

Why was Phillip Proud given #1?

ERNESTINE

Because he was the strongest and he talked the most.

DIRECTOR

And then in the middle here, we have Mary Neary's name, right here, the woman who is now named Mary Neary, but instead of a number we have initials, "N.T.P." what does that mean?

ERNESTINE

Ne tuez pas. Do not kill.

DIRECTOR

She was singled out on this list for this treatment, "N.T.P." no one else was. Why?

ERNESTINE

Didier wasn't thinking straight. No one of us were. He liked her. He said she alone showed him kindness and that she shouldn't be harmed.

NOAH

I was kind of stumbling around because I couldn't see much, that substance had gotten all over in my face and in my eyes, the mess that it sprays out... and I could feel my face and my chest burning, and I heard Lisa screaming.

DIRECTOR

So where was she in relation to the Droditch?

NOAH

It was distracted by a bunch of sirens and horns that came all at once from the parking lot. She was able to run towards me, she was about... I don't know, twenty feet away. The horns I think distracted it and so did this man running for the both of us, but the man didn't make it.

DIRECTOR

So you told the police something about it doing something strange then...?

NOAH

Yeah. Some reason it started to kind of scream, so loud it drowned out everything.

DIRECTOR

What did that sound like?

NOAH

It was pretty horrible, because it wasn't like anger or pain, it was more like... I don't know, it was staring down at this poor man on the floor and looking at what it did to him, and it started to scream like it had some kind of triumph. Like it had gotten everything it wanted and just... couldn't hold in its euphoria.

DIRECTOR

For those listening who don't know: When it feels under assault, the relentless Droditch will reportedly cue a function of its biology, its chemistry. No one who survived April 27th actually saw this happen but it must have, the evidence was found everywhere, the entire hallway in that part of the building was coated with that black hot substance. The Droditch will essentially inflate its upper limbs, its ichor will rush into them from the lower part of its body, and then when the limbs reach a point of maximum capacity and they are utterly distended, which gives the appearance that the Droditch has almost doubled in size, there is an eruption. It's the only word for it. The limbs are destroyed and the ichor is released at its highest temperature in every direction, and then the creature must go into a mode of self-preservation until regeneration of the limbs takes place. But nothing's going to survive that eruption of the pieces of its own self; the substance is lethal until its heat and acidity can be brought under control artificially, which is what the rescuers did. Two of the bodies in the hallway could barely be identified.

This is the point where we made the choice to truly break from the reality we had established through all these very plainly shot interviews, because what Noah describes next here... the visual image was so powerful to me, I thought, maybe it's time in the film for it to become something different, so we went to animation. The woman who created these animations is Stacey Westberg, she's won many awards for her work, I was lucky to get her.

We took some artistic liberty here both in the depiction of what they looked like back then and what happened inside the building, but in essence we're seeing what they did, and we were true even to the detail of how Noah took a hold of Lisa by the upper arm, not by the hand, by the upper arm out of desperation, almost like you'd see a bouncer leading someone out of a bar by force, that's how he did it, it was nothing as romantic as pulling her by the hand, and that is shown here.

Here we have the animation telling the rest of Noah and Lisa's story, in silence except for the music. He'd lost most of the vision in his left eye at that point, there's a photo of his face a reporter took, you can see it online. Lisa was their guide for the last hundred feet—she made the final very smart split-second judgement to double back and head out through the north exit, guiding him.

The deceptive effect that Noah experienced when the hallway was dark because of the dust clouds that were created from the roof collapsing was a totally freak thing. What had happened was that

there was a police vehicle that had been parked across the street, it had only gotten there sixty seconds before, and the sun had finally shaken loose of the clouds a bit and reached a certain angle where it reflected very dramatically and powerfully, almost blindingly, off one of the mirrors and shone this intense burst of light toward Noah and he pulled Lisa toward that. For a second he thought it was some kind of exit light in the darkness, but it was only a single optic showing through an open window just briefly, and here Stacey Westberg draws that effect in a very powerful way, with Noah and Lisa, looking so young, rowing across the surface of this dark roiling sea with the red sky over them and they see a beacon on land drawing them, their way of escape, but they have to contend with these terrible waves to get there.

BILL SAVOY

I left my house on Monday night, it must have been about midnight. I convinced myself I could find the Droditch. I was so stressed and so drunk, I would go out, I would take my brother's shotgun, and I'd get in the car and head for the Pine Barrens.

DIRECTOR

Mmm.

BILL SAVOY

I was convinced I was going to jail, so I decided I was going to be a hero. It sounds completely ridiculous, but that was my mind that night.

DIRECTOR

So what we did here was take the camera out into the woods at night, we tried to find the spot roughly where Bill Savoy went that night in 2002, and it wasn't looking good at all, it had been so many years and he'd been so drunk... and we wound up going up and down this fire road, these are the Pine Barrens of south New Jersey on the screen here, so vast and empty.

Bill was convinced we were on the right track, but going twice up and down this road with just the fog lights wasn't getting us anywhere... but finally he said *Pull over, pull over*, which we did, into a ditch basically, because he had recognized, impossible as it seemed, the entrance to this tiny cemetery in the woods, just about ten graves, it was a Civil War cemetery, totally overgrown. And we got out and he said that was where he started walking randomly for about an hour, with the shotgun. He was sobering up, he wound up doing this big wide loop in this spot.

At about the halfway point he heard the sound that he begins to talk about here, but he had trouble describing it so we cut that part out. So what I did was access this vast sound effects library through Triad Pact Pictures, and I wanted to play for Bill about a dozen sounds kind of like what he was trying to describe, and on the third or fourth cut he said, *That's it, that's what I heard*. This is not in the movie, we decided it was more effective to just let the camera wander here through the woods silently, so dark, which brings us thematically back to the sequence near the beginning when we were wandering inside 120 Cherry Road.

In that moment when Bill heard that sound, all alone at about two in the morning ten miles outside town, deep in the Pine Barrens, he told me he was convinced the Droditch was near, that this one in a million chance was real. And then he began to run.

DIRECTOR

Hello everyone, um, we're doing a bit of a real life jump cut here, the last one we'll do I think.

It is now three weeks after I recorded the first part of this DVD commentary, it's October 12th. I wanted to take some time and think about what I've said on this recording so far. Something's happened out here in the real world which understandably made me pause.

Three weeks ago, in Grand Junction, Colorado, a family visited an old house they had inherited from a relative, the husband's grandmother, a house in the country. So this family of four drove out just to appraise what repairs would need to be done to sell the place, it wasn't in very habitable condition, but they did intend to stay the whole weekend there. Out back, well behind the house in a patch of weeds, was an old Landhorn RV from the seventies, totally in disrepair, up on blocks basically, no one had touched it in years maybe. The seats and the tabletop inside it had been pulled out long ago by a neighbor, he'd bought them for twenty dollars. So the mother and father told their two children not to go near the RV, they made it off limits for the weekend, because who knew what sort of injury they could get inside that big old thing.

The Lampards, that's the family's name.

DIRECTOR

Did you have any idea your friend Charlotte kept this all these years?

LISA

I know she was a total packrat, but not to that extent, no.

DIRECTOR

Do you remember the whole context?

LISA

Not really.

DIRECTOR

How about Benjamin Kidder, any recollections?

LISA

No. Not since junior year. I started going to McArthur.

DIRECTOR

You wrote, 'I'm so mad that Benjamin wasn't at the movie. Noah got it totally wrong. We showed up and suddenly it was like a date. Benjamin wasn't there and neither was his sister. I think Noah got some stuff wrong. Real convenient.'

LISA

You know, just... kids being kids. I just don't know what the point is of going all the way back to that.

DIRECTOR

To give a snapshot of what happened a couple of days before the attack.

LISA

I think you want it all to be something it just never was, and that's why you keep coming back to

DIRECTOR

No, absolutely not. *(turns a page)* You wrote, 'Now I have to be nice. Noah's sweet but he's definitely DNK. Now I still don't know how I'm going to get Benjamin to ask me out.'

DNK, what's DNK?

LISA

Just some little term we would say, you know, talking about which boys we liked for dating and which ones we didn't.

DIRECTOR

But what do the letters stand for?

LISA

I'm sure Charlotte already told you.

DIRECTOR

No, I didn't ask her.

LISA

"Do not kiss."

DIRECTOR

Six months after their interviews were shot for the film, Mary Neary called Bill Savoy on the phone. She found him and called him, having never met him, she'd just read about him in some article connected to the making of the documentary and she called just to express her empathy. They met, and the next I heard, they had gotten involved—romantically, but not in a very traditional sense. The two people in the film who I literally had dreams about being together never would be, never will be, but Bill and Mary somehow connected, and I think they came to each other at exactly the necessary moment in their lives. They found each other in the nick of time maybe.

Bill told me about a time last year when she and Mary were just walking around town together. They tended to be outdoors a lot, in places with a lot of people, understandably. Even though Bill was nowhere near Proud Lake Baptist on April 27th of 2002, in recent years he'd developed a deep growing fear of enclosures and dimly lit places. They walked through a barbecue festival or something, and some guy kept standing too close to Mary, behind her in a soda line, and she turned on this guy and was verbally vicious to him, at random, it really stunned Bill. And he told me he wrestled with that for days, thinking of how the two of them were going to deal with each other's pain day after day, it didn't seem like it could work.

And he found himself at one point standing in front of 120 Cherry Road, the very busy building that replaced the one he'd owned long ago. And he went in, he forced himself to climb up to the fifth floor—there's seven floors now, all filled up—and he went into the men's room next to a dental lab up there, and he looked at himself in the mirror, just stood there. And he started saying to himself over and over again the word *relentless.... relentless*. He decided that their best chance to kill the thing that had been hiding in that building was for he and Mary to keep waking up together day after day, and never stop.

At about ten o'clock on the first night of the Lampard family's stay at their new country house in Grand Junction, the little boy, Jesse, heard a sound from outside, and he went to tell his father about it, but it never came back, so the man, Adam Lampard, decided it was a lovely night to show his son the stars and take him out to where the grass was so tall, show him some nature. He saw that there was a pond out behind that old dinosaur of a Landhorn RV, maybe fifty yards beyond it. He hadn't known about it, just a very small pond, very maybe the size of a golf green, very still water. And they saw ducks sleeping beside it, and Adam Lampard said to his wife, *Hey, maybe we should stay*.

DIRECTOR

I don't know what the endgame is, it's a tough question. You just try to share some true stories with people who wouldn't find them otherwise, I guess.

MARY

See, the one thing you never really have to deal with on your end is that day when you're sitting on your couch, and like you're cruising around the channels... and you know how every channel now has these rows and rows of little pictures, with the title of each thing, hundreds and hundreds of little boxes, and one day out of the blue it happens. You know, you spot the story that you were part of personally. You've got the remote there, and you were trying to find some funny movie to watch or some Tom Cruise thing and instead you see that title and it's like, Oh well, your life is just on the pile with all the other stories. The assembly line just keeps pumping, you know, you're just a little square people are flipping past because it doesn't look grabby enough to pull them in.

I'm not saying you should feel guilty about it, but all this, all this effort with the cameras and the lights and such... that's how all this stuff winds up. That's about as far away from understanding the truth of people's experience as you can get.

DIRECTOR

I'm scared of the Droditch, as I believe I have said. Fairly recently I talked to an Oxford professor who was really scared of flying, really scared, and he said to me you can talk about odds all you want, how safe it is; of course, we all know that, but what if the universe doesn't work the way we think, what if the thing we're most afraid of is, in our own individual reality that we live in that no one else truly sees or touches... what if that's how each of us will die? By this man's logic, if that's the case, then it's the Droditch who will somehow find me one day, a one in a billion chance, find me in a vulnerable moment out on the trail maybe, and sense me from a ravine where it's hiding... stalk me, burn me, scissor me to pieces. The more I think about this professor's theory, the more it makes a kind of strange, very elemental sense.

Crawling, lurching, sleeping its life away: It's the Droditch I think about. Because no one can answer the question: Where is it *now*?

And.... the end music takes us out. We don't have to be with these people anymore.

(In the end we hear an extension of the Nanticoke, Maryland recording: the camper, safe inside a tent, continues to listen to the rain outside... but then, there is a sudden rustling in the trees very close by, and the camper scrambles to emerge from a sleeping bag.)

colony

My name is John Kling. Long ago, sophomore year of college, I took a psychology elective, and the professor said something to us that was so interesting to me I wrote it down. He said: About once in your life, through no real fault of your own, you'll find you've descended into a situation—a moment, he called it—that's completely insane, so insane it breaks your reality. Sometimes the moment is potentially lethal. He said the ones who make it through that moment are the ones who are quickest to stop disbelieving it and start reacting. And I think this is a story of when that happened to me.

It was about twenty-four years ago today, when I was thirty-three, that I first set eyes on Little Oberon. I was doing my morning postal route in the northeast quadrant of Grand County, Colorado, when on Cannonade Road in Beltridge I got caught behind not one but two of those wide load trailers, hauling entire modular homes on their backs, newly minted and shiny. The trailers were struggling down the road at twenty miles an hour. Both of them made a difficult, lumbering turn onto a semi-dirt road called Educator's Lane and made their way into the

forested distance, leaving me with the aggravation of having fallen ten minutes behind on a routine that was only ever delayed by heavy snow or ice in the winter. I assumed someone was finally building on the vast lot no one had owned since the county decided against preserving a two-room schoolhouse back there, a remnant of a small settlement of villagers displaced in 1974 by plans for a freight railroad that never came to be.

Next thing I knew, I was behind a wide load trailer twice a week, and my boss was telling me that yep, a new development was happening out there, one I'd be eventually servicing in my mail truck. About six months after that first midday delay, a silvery bank of mailboxes went up and the tiny development was fully inhabited. Twelve mailboxes in all, standing at the edge of the semi-paved road leading around a bend and out of sight. Somewhere down the lane those modular homes squatted together in a mix of woods and small open fields far away from the nearest gas station or grocery store. Noon-ish on a bright day in October I was sorting mail into those boxes, my truck was idling at the edge of the road, and a woman appeared at the edge of Educator's Lane and gave me a friendly greeting in a pronounced southern accent.

This was Gwenivere Herman, out for a stroll. Very long, prematurely graying hair; she was two years older than me. I lobbed some questions about what brought her to this new development, and what she told me blew my mind. The community had been dreamed up by one man, a professor from the University of Colorado, a man named Richard Madden, Ph.D. It was a permanent retreat of sorts for other professors, semi-retired scientists, and other highly educated thinkers—Gwenivere said, 'Yeah, we're total eggheads.' The idea was to form a housing collective where people from various academic realms could get together in a relaxed, obligation-free setting and challenge themselves to think-tank their way through the world's problems, far away from the demands of city and even academic life. A kind of brainiacs' club where the members lived and dined and talked together most of the year, maybe writing a paper here and there but nothing official. No grants, no taxpayer money, nothing like that. Everyone there was generally well-off enough to teach maybe part-time. The community was planned to max out at fifteen or twenty of these modular homes, no kids. So far, Gwenivere told me, the activity had consisted mostly of a lot of pot-smoking and BS-ing, but everyone was still getting settled in and the real deep-dive community think-outs would get underway soon. Richard Madden called the place Little Oberon as a silly reference to the space station that Charlton Heston's cruising around in at the beginning of *Planet of the Apes*.

Well, let me tell you, when Gwenivere first explained this all to me that day two and a half decades ago now, I just about died of jealousy. I didn't tell her this then, but I'd been in that mail truck for the past seven years after bailing out of a master's program in history at the University of Chicago, moving back home to take care of my father and then getting married, and the notion of living in a community like that, even if it might flop as a lot of these things probably did... it seemed like heaven. I could see myself sitting around a campfire at night tossing ideas back and forth about class conflict and mass media and getting pleasantly stoned while doing it, stuffing S'mores in my face.

Anyway, Gwen and I felt like fast friends from that very moment. Around her I could slip back into my old freshman mindset of boundless curiosity and what-ifs, the mindset I'd sort of let slip away as my responsibilities in life had mounted. She was an Emory grad, a sociologist

with a focus on agrarian populations and economies in America. She'd been left a pretty decent fortune by her parents and she and her husband Roger, an expert in penology of all things, had now moved from a fancy brownstone in Savannah to a factory-built saltine box sitting on glorified cinderblocks in the grass. I didn't know it just then, but he was pretty ill, with Guillain-Barré syndrome. He'd never properly emerged from its mostly treatable first stages and she spent much of her time helping him along through his slowly escalating progression of symptoms: extreme fatigue, muscle weakness, vision problems.

I welcomed her to Beltrige, one of the many gateways to Rocky Mountain National Park and seat of the biggest income disparities in the state, much of which I saw up-close on my daily postal route. Little Oberon itself felt very secluded but was only about two miles away from a plethora of struggling farms, and four miles from the fading mill town of Clover Pocket, population 90.

I was so punctual and predictable that Gwen would wait for me at the mailboxes once a week or so. She told me the community's first real project would be to address the question of overdevelopment in small towns; they wanted to conceive radical new ideas to keep money flowing into struggling places without turning them into giant strip malls and condo complexes. Notes and emails and paper would flow from home to home and the colonists, as I thought of them, would all gather in a central house once a day, five days a week, to discuss ideas and theories. Food apparently was always a big part of these gatherings, and we're not talking take-out here. Three months after they all started thinking, she put into my hands a first draft of what the community had written up, about 150 pages long. I asked her, 'So who's this going to?' and she just shrugged and laughed and said, 'I dunno.' She invited me to swing by for coffee whenever I felt like it, and I told her I would, since I was definitely curious about the layout of the place, but it was a long while before our schedules synched up. Finally sometime near Christmas I took the truck after work over to her little house.

There was only so much the community could do to spruce up the land, but to me it was still kind of idyllic. Those little modular houses nestled together in twos and threes on bumpy natural lots. They'd vowed to not cut down any trees along Educator's Lane. The lane petered out into a wild field just about a mile after the turnoff from Cannonade Road, a few hundred yards shy of the old abandoned schoolhouse. Gwen walked me over to meet a couple of her fellow eggheads, who were in the middle of weather-proofing their cheap house a little better. We stood around and bemoaned the fate of the world and had a few laughs, and I left feeling just as jealous as before. The colony was about to begin work on pondering the growing power imbalance between humans and animals in the world: good deep Anthropocene epoch trash-talking. They had three ecologists living there already who were eager to dig into stuff like that. The couple I'd met that afternoon had referred to themselves and everyone else who lived there as relentless tree-huggers. Human and animal imbalance: It sounded like such a huge, epic thought experiment I went to sleep the next few nights pondering just what could result from a study like that. I really wanted to read it someday.

So that was Little Oberon, in the beginning. My route got shifted the following spring but I traded with a fellow postman so I could still deliver to the community three days a month. I

learned everyone's names from the envelopes and junk mail they got, and I got to chat with Gwen at least once a month. Sometimes I would even leave her a message about when I was going to deliver. Up Educator's Lane she would trudge in shorts and sandals in warm weather, and one time stomping through six inches of snow in a trenchcoat and boots. Sometimes we would swap classic rock LPs. She introduced me to Atlanta Rhythm Section and I introduced her to The Mothers of Invention, and she had a pristine Dansette from the early sixties that weighed about seventy pounds. I would always ask her what everyone was working on. The ecologists had really gotten a foothold, she said one day with no negativity whatsoever. They were still managing to kick around touchy debates about the nation's prison system and drug policies. Not too many more houses were brought in, and things seemed nice and stable for them.

One time, it was in February, I stayed at the central mail branch in Granby till past midnight after part of the roof there collapsed from the previous night's snow, and I got detoured down Cannonade Road on my way home because of plowing. I pulled over near the bank of mailboxes outside Little Oberon and decided to enjoy a late-night walk in. The colonists had bought their own plow because the county didn't maintain Educator's Lane. Apparently the guy who knew how to work it best and cleared the road whenever it was necessary was once short-listed for a Nobel prize in economics. I always loved to tell people at work this fact, I don't know why. So I strolled on packed snow down the lane, past the modular houses, happy as can be. Still more than a few lights on that late as the thinkers stayed up... and of course in my mind they weren't just watching *Jeopardy* or cleaning; they were all in deep thought, studying and writing at rolltop desks until dawn. The sky was full of stars and I walked all the way down to the field near where the schoolhouse was, but there were eight inches of snow there and that's as far as I could go. I watched about a dozen deer walk across the field, completely confident in their separation from humankind, and I watched a big fox investigating the strange cold white phenomenon all around like it had never seen snow before.

One of my fondest memories is heading back toward my truck and seeing someone coming down the lane, bundled up, walking a dog, and realizing it was Gwen herself. She was walking her neighbor's irritating poodle while he was away at a conference, and both of us wondered what the hell the other was doing out here so late, and laughed like we were college kids with our whole lives ahead of us.

I never did tell her that there was always a poignant tug for me when I was on Educator's Lane. I'd realized at some point as an adult that the real reason I'd dropped out of college was because I really thought back then that I was smarter than everyone else. I thought there nothing anyone could teach me. I didn't need their lessons or their rules. And those chances, those open roads I once had in the palm of my hand, felt gone now. All I felt I had left of those days was occasionally using big words to sound like I was super-educated, plus the academia fantasies walking in Little Oberon gave me. I hope I'm not using big words obnoxiously too much in this story.

Anyway, the time crept by, as it does. My wife had a baby, which we'd conceived a little unexpectedly, and Gwen dove into writing a book about water conservation in addition to heading up a lot of the community's work and travelling to do research, and we sort of lost touch a little but there were random times when she still appeared at the mailboxes, keeping an eye out for me. Around the fall of 2008, I think it was, I noticed that there'd been more turnover than usual in the names on the mailboxes, and one day when Gwen caught me at the right time we stood looking out over Cannonade Road discussing it.

Frankly, she said, a couple of the more recent arrivals had brought a bit of a dark cloud with them. Unlike Richard Madden and most of the original founders of the colony, these folks were pretty pessimistic about the fate of the world and human beings in general, and some of their more dour theories brought them into conflict with some of the other thinkers. There had been a recent civilized falling out or two, hence the turnover. Gwen and her husband were still committed to the ideals of pure thought and intellectual expression that had kept Little Oberon cozy for years, and she seemed excited when she told me about some of the papers they'd produced. I even remember the title of one: *Wildlife Domain Survival Among the American Superhighway System*. There were about ten fewer people there overall in 2008, down from the original thirty-five or so.

I happened to meet Little Oberon's founder, Richard Madden, himself about a year later. When I was sorting mail into the boxes and sneaking a little Christmas card in there for Gwen, I saw a Jeep with an almost completely severed muffler near the edge of the lane. A very tall, stocky man with shoulder-length gray hair and gray beard was looking at it, kind of befuddled. He'd just hit one of Educator's Lane's many potholes and shaken his muffler free. Fixing those holes wasn't easy and they weren't doing such a great job keeping on top of them. He said, 'Oh, you must be Gwen's rock friend!' Told me he was thinking of getting an LP player himself after Gwen and Roger had played *Chelsea Girl* for him. Nice guy, took the muffler thing in stride. Looked like he should be out hunting elk somewhere, a real mountain type physically. He had some unfortunate news to impart that day, which was that he was leaving Little Oberon sometime in the next few weeks. I couldn't help but ask him why.

He said, 'Oh, maybe the idea just had a shelf life.' I took that to mean everyone was packing up and he said, 'No no, just me at the moment.' Then I remember he looked up at that cold winter sky, looking sad, and he said, 'Or maybe I just don't understand people the way I thought.' So there it was, about six years after he'd founded the colony, he was finally headed out. We shook hands and I told him I was truly impressed with his original idea, however it wound up. I thought it would be the only time I'd ever see him, but I was wrong.

In 2010, just before I lost even the part-time aspect of the Cannonade Road route, a new name appeared on one of those mailboxes. I saw it only because I went out of my way to drive by Little Oberon, it had just been so long since I'd been back. The name was Dr. Sebastian Burkle. One of the last times I saw Gwen during that period, she told me Burkle was kind of a polarizing figure in the scientific realm. Some people, like Richard Madden, considered him a

visionary genius; other people thought he was a bit of a fraud. There'd been some controversy about Cornell not offering him tenure a couple years before, leading to his premature retirement and relocation west. Within two weeks of settling there, Gwen said, he'd already spoken up on some very different ideas about what problems the colony should be focusing on, and about getting more practical with their work. She thought more people would probably be leaving before the place became a real think tank obligated to take their ideas public or, God forbid, make literal sense of the crazy quilt of ideas they brought together. She perked herself up by insisting I come over to the house for a few minutes to try out a new molasses cookie recipe she'd been torturing her husband with. I went. Roger was there, looking thin and weak because of his chronic illness, but cheerful enough. The cookies were not great, but the company was pretty priceless.

It was true, people began to leave Little Oberon kind of en masse after that. On my way to my kid's new school sometimes, I would drive past the mailboxes and some of them were simply taken down, little by little, as if someone had realized the population of Little Oberon wouldn't ever be climbing back to its old level. Gwen stayed, though, thank God. I thought her leaving would have been too sad a thought for me to deal with. You see, somehow she'd wound up being by only real adult friend. When you're in college or in your twenties it seems impossible that you could wind up a little lonely, even with a happy marriage going on, but I'm here to tell you, even the friends you used to be closest with get slowly drawn away into their own kingdoms, because those kingdoms need such tending.

By 2012 or so, with Gwen and I both ensconced in the temperate prairie of our forties, there were only about twelve mailboxes left in the colony, and only about six of the residents were part of the original group. 'We're all human and animal power balance all the time now,' Gwen told me before what I didn't know then was about to be a very long time of being out of contact with her. We were on the phone. I'd called her to see how she was doing digging out after the big storm of 2014, twenty-two inches of snow dumped on those little houses. She and everyone else had dug out OK, but she clearly wasn't very happy with some of the people who had come in. She used terms like 'bunker mentality' and called some of their writing 'defeatism porn.' She said, *Sebastian gets obsessed with these cataclysmic ecological scenarios. This is what got him guided not so gently out of Cornell.* She wanted me to read one of the colony's latest monographs, so she dropped a PDF to me in an email. I noticed how she used the word *their*, not *our*.

I read most of the thing. One hundred and eighty pages of fairly dire stuff about well-intentioned conservation designs throughout history that had gone nowhere. Very well-written and reasoned, plenty of references to academic texts I'd never heard of. They'd all spent months shuffling around to each other's houses debating the reality of the Sixth Mass Extinction, and the monograph ended on a dark note, envisioning a world where global warming, industrialization, and simple human selfishness might bring about the destruction of so many animal species that humans would go power-mad in their own dominance of the animal kingdom itself, using technology to essentially turn the planet into a giant hyper-controlled zoo. Most everyone in Little Oberon had appended their names to the front page

of the monograph, like they usually did. Sebastian Burkle's name was at the top, in a larger font than anyone else. The whole thing did have a very different tone than seemed in keeping with the free-spiritedness I'd felt in the colony in the early days a decade before. Hell, Richard Madden would even occasionally draw crude little single-panel cartoons in the first monographs they'd produced, just because. But that was then, and this was now.

When I brought a tin of Christmas cookies to Gwen in 2015, there was, to my surprise, a gate in front of the entrance to Educator's Lane. Not a locked gate, not an attended gate, just a swinging thing about three feet high; anyone could easily push through its long metal arms if they wanted. But I wondered why it should even be there. I got out of my car and pushed it open and drove through it.

A half mile past the bend Gwen jokingly called Dead Man's Curve, there was a note on the door of her house. It was actually intended for one of her neighbors, saying she and Roger were in Santa Fe for a couple of days, at Christus St. Vincent Hospital. So I left the cookies on her step. Looking around, everything seemed so quiet. In the distance, the cloud cover had withdrawn enough so I could see the mountains in all their intimidating glory. With fewer and fewer people in Little Oberon now, its isolation didn't feel, at least to an outsider like me, like the convivial campground it had seemed like when I'd first driven into it so many years before. It was, after all, technically, in the wilderness, and it felt lonely to me now. I drove back through the little entrance gate, but smugly I didn't get out and swing the arms closed behind me. It just felt better not to.

In January of 2016, my son was swallowing pool water in the junior swimming championships in Colorado Springs and my new daughter was already changing the settings on her mom's iPad. I hadn't been to Educator's Lane in a long time, having moved to Walden after Vanessa's birth. Gwen and I had exchanged Christmas cards and very occasional texts since then, adding a little note to each one about how we were doing, but nothing more. She hinted that these would likely be her last days at Little Oberon, but that change of address never seemed to come. I understood a thing or so about nesting, the pull of the comforting and familiar when the years start to mount up.

One cold bleak day I was asleep on my sofa in the living room at about noon. The kids were at school, Lancaster Middle and Steamboat Daytime. My wife was in her workspace downstairs and I was resting from kind of a grueling day on the job. My phone rang. To my great surprise, it was Gwen. First time we'd actually spoken in years. We didn't have much in the way of preliminaries because she sounded a little hurried and a little upset. After asking about Jennifer and the kids, she asked me right off if I could maybe meet her in Craig, about ten miles from Little Oberon, because there was some stuff she wanted to tell me about the colony, stuff she really wanted to get off her back. I said *Sure, how about I just come all the way to you?* But she said no, not such a great idea at the moment. And so I drove to Craig, to a dive bar there called The Silver Hammer, worried about Gwen's tone on the phone. I'd never heard her be so serious, it was unsettling.

It started to sleet just as I got to the bar. There were absolutely no customers in the place except Gwen herself, there she was. Totally gray now, having made no effort to dye her hair or anything, that wasn't her style. Looking a little frail and tired, but otherwise much the same as I remembered her from our first introduction thirteen years before. Big smile when I sat down, big hug just like she used to do—she had a funny thing where she would put her hands on the back of your head when she hugged, like she wanted to give your skull a little feel. It was just after we spent a couple of minutes with niceties that the cloud came over her and stayed there for a full hour and a half, and she began to tell me the story of all that had happened after the arrival of Sebastian Burkle in Little Oberon. Let's see if I can remember all the details she gave me that afternoon, and not just the vivid memories of the Galaga machine near the bathroom and England Dan and John Ford Coley playing on the speaker above us and sleet tapping at the window behind Gwen's head, the window with the big black sticker in the corner, a silhouette of a grizzly bear.

Since 2012 the 'Burklists,' as Gwen called them, had exerted an ever-stronger influence on the papers the community produced. I already knew that. It wasn't too long before the sole focus of the scholars who still lived there was to figure out a way to actively correct the power relationship between humans and animals before the latter's inevitable enslavement. Gwen had still been able to pull some of Little Oberon's sharpest minds into her own ruminations and monographs on agricultural sustainability, but less and less, until Sebastian Burkle himself had sat her down and asked her to please devote herself full-time to the core thought work he thought they should be doing, as it involved a lot of rigorous re-education for the scholars there who had come in with less grounding in the sciences. The balance in expertise in Little Oberon had shifted greatly. No longer was there a smattering of PhDs in political science or sociology. Ecologists and chemists and even a prominent meteorologist, that was who made up Little Oberon after 2014.

The real problem for Gwen wasn't what they wanted to work on, it was the tone of the work. Some of these people, she said, may have been among the top minds on their fields, but they seemed to have come to the colony after professional difficulties elsewhere, and their views leaned toward the extreme. One professor from Penn State had self-published a couple of very unusual and dubious books about the concept of tectonic warfare, something I'd never heard of, and someone else, a PhD in zoology, had left the University of Minnesota after starting a website openly decrying their allegedly narrow views on global species extinction—kind of a crude and classless maneuver in Gwen's view. And then there was Sebastian Burkle, undoubtedly brilliant but seemingly unable to see any good in anyone, any human system, always convinced that slow progress across generations was a course doomed for corruption. He believed and wrote extensively that drastic actions were what changed history. Revolutions, shock tactics, even failed ones: These were what it took to really shift thought paradigms. Scientific martyrdom, Gwen called it. It was wearying to her and the original colonists of Little Oberon. The debates between them and the Burklists just didn't seem to go anywhere. Burklists were shouters, Gwen said, staring into her gin at The Silver Hammer. She and her old friends were not. So the Burklists more or less took control, and they seemed to slowly forget the notion of pure thought and the beauty of ideas without consequence; they wanted to... *do* something. Do something to save the world.

I told her I'd spotted Sebastian Burkle in a hardware store over in Nanucet a few years before. I'd been near the counter and I looked up, kind of startled, when he gave his name to the cashier for a pickup of what looked like a special padlock, an electronic padlock, came to like three hundred bucks. That night I'd looked him up online, including a couple of photos. I told Gwen my impression was that he hadn't aged so well since about 2005, which was when he'd been last seen on the faculty at Cornell. I said his face struck me in a very particular way. Like he'd become a heavy drinker, to be honest. Gwen nodded. Yeah, she said, he drank a lot but he never seemed drunk. Never got upset himself. That was more Enrique, she said. She was referring to a very young biology wizard who'd gotten there in 2015. Enrique Cuesta, young and fiery, a genius who had no interest in staying attached very long to any one university or even human relationship. The way she referred to him throughout her telling of the story, I got this sense that just maybe she'd had some kind of unspoken, unconsummated thing with him, and it had affected her.

After one particular series of discussions on the Sixth Extinction had gotten much too apocalyptic for Gwen's taste, she told Sebastian Burkle that she was going to be taking a year off from the group. She intended to stay in her house and pay more attention to what her husband needed. Roger by that time was mostly confined to a wheelchair, frustrating the legions of doctors who had tried to help him recover from Guillain-Barré, which had been exacerbated by a case of Lyme disease. She needed to cocoon herself from the stress of a splintering community and lie low for a while. Burkle said that of course, Gwen was free to do as she chose. Gwen realized then that Burkle didn't want her there at all, really. She thought her presence made him and some of the others uncomfortable.

Literally two days after Gwen told him of her intentions, there was a freak occurrence that somehow changed things for the worse. At four o'clock one afternoon, Sandra Mehta, forty years old, Little Oberon resident since 2012, a wunderkind surgeon who had later become a scholar of animal physiology, came stumbling down Educator's Lane from the direction of the Spearmint Trail, yelling in terror and pounding on the door of the first modular house she came to. When she was safe inside and her wounds had been tended to, she told everyone she'd been out walking the trail when she heard a whooping sound nearby. There was a rush of wings and suddenly something had hooked violently into the back of her neck. After a flash of pain her whole body was knocked off balance and everything went dark as something's body engulfed her head. She felt herself dragged forward, losing control, before the talons of an owl lost their grip on her head and it flew off. Blood was flowing freely down her neck. She started to run but the owl swooped back, delivering an audible hooting warning, but then arcing down right into her face, talons out. Her left eyebrow was torn and she frantically pounded the owl away, tearing off down the trail, coming out near the old schoolhouse. It was the kind of thing that simply could happen there at the base of the mountains. Sandra Mehta confided to Gwen she was especially affected because it mimicked a dream she'd had for years about death coming for her in the forest when she'd made a bad decision to be there.

Sebastian Burkle seemed to give this unusual attack a significance Gwen didn't understand. He excused himself from that week's series of discussions on the current topic of discussions and became strangely secluded for a while. At some point he revealed to everyone that he'd summoned a man from Wales named Broderick Davith to live in the community, and he talked about this man's research on organismal ecology as if it were the most important thing

the world had ever seen. Here came Broderick Davith just two weeks later. He was about seventy then, not at all friendly. He intended to live separately from the community on a parcel of land just to the east, twelve acres Sebastian had bought a couple of years before, as an investment, he'd said. Aside from that, Davith wasn't talked about much, and he was almost never seen. Gwen would watch for the man's weird tuft of screaming red hair; he insisted on dyeing it intensely.

In 2016 Gwen and Roger became the last of the original colonists, as her old neighbors, the ones I'd met, had left somewhat hastily, mincing no words about how disturbed they were at the direction things had taken. After they were gone, the scheduled meetings and rap sessions gradually ceased, no new projects were formed, and the place became, very quietly, nothing more than a dozen or so people living their own lives and communicating in ones and twos about things that weren't freely shared. Upkeep on the property itself continued to fade. The place felt like it had died, Gwen said.

And Broderick Davith worried her, she told me. It was the first time she'd used a word like that. Not confused or frustrated, but worried. Outwardly, he seemed like one of those few impenetrable scholars who felt safer just shutting down on human beings, unable to deal with them, but there was a secrecy and an evasiveness that he and Sebastian Burkle had cultivated in Little Oberon that made her think they were working together on something they wouldn't even tell some of the other Burklists about. The other property that Burkle had bought, a half hour hike down the Spearmint Trail, was alluded to as where Davith lived and worked in seclusion, but no one but Burkle ever seemed to be invited there. Gwen stopped talking about community projects anymore, wouldn't even inquire about them on the most general level. The Burklists seemed to sense her uneasiness, but instead of trying to make her feel better about it, they'd only withdrawn from her, treated her like someone to be endured, a burden.

I finally said to her there in the bar, *Let me help you get out of there*, but she told me about a complication that was keeping her in place. Sandra Mehta had some time ago expressed an interest in Roger's medical case. He'd become depressed over the years trying various treatments for his illness and travelling the west for consultation after consultation and he was exhausted from it, wanting only live out his days inside the house in the most peaceful setting possible. A tragic attitude from someone just fifty-five or so. Dr. Mehta was a serious practitioner of holistic medicine, and started him on an experimental series of treatments based mostly on root of turmeric, kudzu extract, and very low doses of arsenic, augmented by an unusual course of sonic vibration therapy based partially on the research of none other than Broderick Davith, whom Gwen still almost never saw. At first Gwen had fought against this program but Roger had responded to it, slowly at first, then almost stunningly well over the course of six months. It had almost made Gwen rethink her understanding of traditional medicine, and if the new stress of living in Little Oberon came with this continuing benefit, she didn't quite want to mess that up yet.

She apologized for being so dramatic. She just wanted a friendly face to talk to about it. She talked on the phone a lot with her sister in Georgia, but it wasn't quite the same. I assured her I'd swing by within the month, but she was firm that I not do that yet, that I go back to my routine and she'd call me if she really needed the company. She said there in the bar, *We're not twenty-one and we're not even thirty-five, and I'm not going to add to a fellow adult's daily mental load. I think the best present friends can give to each other in big adult life is just goodwill*

without obligation. I knew what she was saying. I didn't even deny it. Goodwill without obligation. I had one kid with concerning emotional problems and another with a newly diagnosed hearing handicap, and I had my hands full. Most days were just about keeping that tiny little paper boat upright on the river of life. You know what I mean.

Before we left the bar, Gwen did make me laugh with her dramatic recap of the awful new reality shows she kept succumbing to. We hugged goodbye, and after we picked up our lives it would only be very occasional texts between us, all pretty upbeat, reassuring, and time slipping by, slipping by, with no invitation to come to Little Oberon to say hi, pop in for hot cocoa, debate the merits of *The White Album* maybe. That never did come. Gwen never asked to meet up again so she could fill me in on what was happening in the colony, so I began to assume everything had settled down. I'd been promoted out of the mail truck and into full-time management, and I no longer drove down Cannonade Road even once in a while. It was kind of far away.

Finally in 2018 came an excited text message with a smiley face emoji. *We're moving!* Gwen typed. *Off to a borderline commune situation in Fort Collins, but with ignorant young'uns this time. Lots of terrible poetry probably. Couldn't be more excited. Roger is doing well.* I got a postcard from her when she settled in, and I sent her a bottle of wine my wife picked out.

At the bottom of my welcome card, I made an offhand jokey reference to a local news story I'd noticed a month before. Dr. Sebastian Burkle had been arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct in Clover Pocket after an altercation on the street with Dr. Sandra Mehta. No charges actually filed.

Strangely, Gwen never responded to that. But then I thought, well, I shouldn't have even mentioned it. Little Oberon was officially in the past for her. And for myself, too, until November 25th, 2022.

It was about ten o'clock, a Friday night, and I was sitting in my living room watching *The Price Is Right* of all things. Jennifer and the kids had stayed in Ohio after Thanksgiving Day and I'd flown back to go right back to work on the weekend. The alone time was kind of delightful, of course, five days to myself. But just before the showcase showdown, my phone began to chime, once every five or six seconds. I walked into the kitchen to track it down, a little alarmed, because the chimes just did not stop. Someone was sending me a big block of texts. It was Gwen. The first time I'd even heard from her in four years, since her move to Fort Collins. We'd just drifted irrevocably apart, no harm, no foul, no blame.

Her very first text after that long drought of communication said: *It's you-know-who. Let's get together later this week. I'm paying a visit to Little Oberon tomorrow morning. First time since forever.* Then, the next one: *Much more to tell later. Something bad is happening.* On the heels of this came photos that had been sent to her unexpectedly by Enrique Cuesta the week before, Enrique Cuesta the brash, overconfident genius she'd mentioned to me once and had long since fallen out of touch with. He had once been a devout Burklist, but I learned later he'd left the colony quietly six months before. I texted Gwen back: *Awesome to know you're*

still conquering the universe. I can go with you tomorrow if you want. But to this, her response was: *Nah, it's not your fight. I'll be cool.*

There were no captions for the four photos of Little Oberon as it stood when they'd been taken, no commentary, just wide shots of the few remaining modular houses. The colonists had long ago all entered an agreement not to sell to outsiders, to buy cheaply instead, sell only to other academics who wanted to replace them in the community, and responsibly raze if the time came. There had been a lot of razing in the past six years, it looked like.

I wondered at first why Gwen had bothered to forward me those photos, but later I figured that just like Enrique Cuesta had done for her, she was trying to paint a silent picture for me as best she could. Those innocuous photos were so visceral somehow. *Much more to tell later. Something bad is happening.* The lack of explanation for the last two photos was especially troubling. One showed a cheap-looking warehouse-type of building erected in the middle of an unfamiliar clearing. The place had the look of an auto body shop but completely unmarked, no windows. The very last picture had for whatever reason zoomed in on the front door of this place, to focus mostly on the stout electronic keylock that barred entry into the building. It was something a fair bit more sophisticated and secure than the one I'd witnessed Sebastian Burkle purchase ten years before.

I was distracted and unsettled all the next day. I decided not to go into work and just pay the price later. A fair amount of snow was supposed to be coming that night, and I busied myself as best I could putting salt down on the drive and putting my new snow tires on the car. At around noon I decided to text Gwen, asking her how the trip was going. I didn't get any answer. An hour later I thought, *What's the harm in calling?* But there was no answer still.

The nervous energy I was feeling wasn't going to go away. I wanted to go out there. Just an hour drive. I tried to tell myself that it was just the friendly thing to do, and maybe a nice surprise for her, to drop in on her there even before we met up later in the week. I could maybe walk down Educator's Lane, just to take a look in case I was not welcome by whoever was left there. By then, surely, Gwen would have texted back. *Why not just go? What was the harm? I was useless doing anything else that day, not knowing.*

I drove toward Cannonade Road alone. There had been some noticeable development around Beltridge in the nineteen years since Little Oberon was born. Two new housing communities, one of them an especially depressing and treeless McMansion affair, had sprung up near the colony, along with a grocery store and gas station, and a little strip mall. But mostly it was still quiet and unspoiled. I forget the western writer who wrote, *Please God, be kind to the lonely places that will always be smaller than the sky above them.*

Before I begin to tell you some things beyond my first-hand observations of this day, I will tell you that most of the information I wasn't privy to in those hours quickly came from the police investigations that followed, but some of it even I had to find out or recall through reading one of the several books since published about everything that happened, including the one I cooperated with and in which I'm quoted. It's called *The Curse of Intention: Scientific and Personal Madness in Little Oberon*, by an author named Susan Roth.

I pulled up outside the old bank of mailboxes at just past three. There were just six boxes now, and oddly, none of them had the names of individuals, no pieces of sticky tape identifying

their owners. Just one had the address 104 Educator's Lane on it in the kind of reflective, impersonal block letters you'd buy at a hardware store. The old gate was still there, in bad shape. Its arms were wide open.

I left my old Volvo sitting in a wide spot beside the mailboxes and stepped out into the two inches of fresh snow that had fallen that morning, the precursor to the larger front that would be arriving in Grand County in another few hours. I wanted to walk in, partially because of nostalgia, partially because I thought I'd be seen as less aggressive that way somehow. Twisty Cannonade Road was very quiet, which made sense. One tractor trailer headed north rolled past me, but nothing else. I turned and started to head on foot into Little Oberon down Educator's Lane.

That first part, that stroll down the pockmarked road before it took a sharp curve, was as picturesque as it had ever been. Nice thin blanket of snow in the trees, it looked like the cover of an album of new age music. The effect, though, was corrupted by a sound I'd never heard out here. It was a very low, semi-electric hum, like from distant power lines, so soft that if I hadn't paused to stop and kneel to tie my boot laces, I wouldn't have heard it at all for a while. A smooth hum with a kind of ripple to it, seeming to come from close by and far away at the same time. Even the gentle rising and falling of the wind obscured it almost to the point of being inaudible. Artificial, yeah, something not created by nature, but delicate enough to make it seem so. I kept walking, immediately finding it irrationally aggravating. As I walked, the volume remained strangely consistent.

Around the bend, the first modular homes came into view. No cars in front of the first two I saw, and no signs of habitation. The windows all seemed kind of dirty. Same with the next group. A couple of empty trash cans were lying on their sides in the snow. From my distant memory of the layout, I could tell that one cluster of houses had been removed entirely, leaving a scraped muddy gap before the trees fell away for a stretch. Vacant lots with perfect snow cover, no human footsteps, no hoofprints. I reminded myself how many years it had been since I had been here, since even Gwen had been here, and how much could happen in a span like that.

Only at 104 Educator's Lane did it seem like there may have been an actual resident. I remembered now that 104 used to house a professor named Vasco. That was where he used to live, back in 2005 or so. Not sure when he left, he was one of the first to go I think. The car parked in front of it now was a Chevy pickup with a messy stack of loose fencing in the back, wire fencing. Across Educator's Lane, parked mostly on the pavement to avoid problems with the snow, was a gray Toyota I recognized right away. It was Gwen's. Since I'd actually pointed out the listing to her, she'd been as devoted to that pile of junk as she was to her collection of Pretenders albums.

I texted Gwen that I was here, just outside 104, but the signal, never strong to begin with out there, was nonexistent. I didn't know then that the subtle sonic vibration all around me was dampening it beyond hope. *No service*, my phone insisted again and again.

I crunched down the icy stone walkway that led to the front door of the house. I rapped twice on the cheap glass of the outer door. Nobody came. Lather, rinse, repeat, and then I backed up into the tiny slice of front yard and just looked at the house, perfectly still and silent. I listened to the mysterious hum that sounded just as close and just as far away as when I'd

first pulled up beside the mailboxes. The colony had the atmosphere of a cemetery no relatives came to and no caretakers tended unless the calendar told them it was time.

I walked over to Gwen's Toyota and peered in. Her purse was there, on the passenger's seat. I saw something leaning against it: a thick bunch of paper, a document about a hundred pages long, straining the capacity limits of a single oversized paperclip. I pulled on the driver's side door and it opened. I sat myself down on the driver's seat, one leg still hanging outside, and looked more closely at this document. There was a receipt for its printing from one of those FedEx Office places, in Fort Collins. The original PDF, I learned much later, had been stitched together from a dozen different files and emailed to Gwen surreptitiously by Enrique Cuesta a few days before when he finally felt compelled to tell someone what he knew. Gwen had then brought the printout with her to the colony that day.

One of the first sections drew me in because of a title page, taken from a paper whose contents were only partially reproduced in this document. Three names were on top: Dr. Sebastian Burkle, Dr. Sandra Mehta, and Dr. Broderick Davith. The name of that paper, dated eighteen months previous, was *Case Studies of Interspecies Cooperation During Duress*. Another title page, dated just six months previous, bore the name *Responses to Lymbic System Provocations via Auditory Sessions A1, B1, C1*. Gwen had only printed out the first five pages of that report.

Getting very cold, I closed the driver's side door. Nothing moved inside 104 Educator's Lane, or anywhere else on the road.

I began to flip through the document collage in my hands more seriously. The files were full of scientific data, charts I couldn't possibly understand. Assembled by advanced scientific minds, obviously.

An unfamiliar name appeared again and again in that document's pages. It was the name of an organization that had offered some input, direction, and money into the research hinted at here. The name was Region Ten. I knew nothing of who they were on that day.

They were kind of a dark, touchy subject to law-abiding animal rights defenders, Gwen included. A lot of people wanted to forget Region Ten's history. They'd worked out of Guam, and they'd been classified by the FBI as a domestic ecoterrorist group in 1969. At the height of their brief existence, Region Ten was comprised of all of six people, all of them young scientists. They'd all been put in jail for life for arranging a Sarin gas attack on the CEO of a lumber company in central Mexico.

Region Ten believed that humankind itself was an evolutionary error that needed to be not just corrected but expunged so that what they believed was the natural design of Earth's ecology could play out. They had all died in prison, all of them, two by suicide. Yet here was that name again, in 2022, in black and white, in papers written by Sebastian Burkle, Sandra Mehta, and Broderick Davith, to be read and discussed by.... well, that wasn't clear.

The intention of my skimming was just to get a snapshot of what the last of the Burklists were involved with. Only about ten minutes after I started, I was convinced that one or all of them had lost their grip on reality. I understood why Gwen had felt the need to come here, why Enrique Cuesta, after he had abandoned Little Oberon, had eventually reached out to her.

I got out of the car, leaving the document inside. The thought of trying to call the police crossed my mind, but even if I had driven out to catch a cell signal, I wasn't sure what kind of crime I would be describing, or if technically, the papers in Gwen's car showed that any crime was being committed. Just a little more looking around, I told myself. I had a destination in mind, and I needed to find Gwen.

I walked further down Educator's Lane. In two hundred yards I'd left the nest of moribund houses behind and headed off into the big field beyond them, already a little winded, having been unable to ever completely give up smoking. I trudged over a slight rise and on the other side was the old two-room schoolhouse, still mostly intact now thanks to the informal preservation efforts of the original Little Oberon colonists. They'd removed about half the ivy I remembered but they hadn't painted or anything. Someone had replaced the one window facing east—Gwen had mentioned to me a long time ago—but the slightly crooked door leading in was still split diagonally and there was no saving that foundation, it was cracked all over.

About a hundred yards past the field, the trees closed in tight again all around. You had to be observant to notice the tiny gap in the underbrush which signified the beginning of the Spearmint Trail. I only vaguely knew where the entrance was because of the story I'd gotten of Sandra Mehta's nature encounter with the owl. I started down the trail which would, in about a mile, according to what Gwen had told me back at The Silver Hammer years before, lead me to the patch of land Sebastian Burkle had bought long ago. The aggravating sonic strangeness that was that subauditory hum both followed me and lead me. Its source may have been located a thousand feet up in the sky for all the clues I could glean about where it was coming from. But at least now I thought from my reading that I knew what it meant.

It was about quarter to four. Except for the wind through the trees, the trail itself was completely silent. No occasional rustling of unseen small animals. No disturbing indications of larger ones. It was tough to follow the trail sometimes because the recent snow cover effectively blotted it out, and once I started heading off in the wrong direction before I realized that the footprints I'd been roughly following, mostly filled in by snow, making them less distinct, were gone. After I found them again, I was more careful.

I stopped before I got to the end of the trail, and thought of Gwen. *Go back*, I thought. *What is your obligation to her, compared to your obligation at home to Jennifer, Vanessa, and Ben? Gwen slipped away years ago. There's not even a photo of you two together, not one. Go back.*

But I was worried for her. One look at the end of the trail, one look and then I'd backpedal all the way and eventually get through to the police. I'd apologize to them for being so paranoid, but just a courtesy look around was all I'd ask for, a welfare check was what I think it was called, because an old friend of mine had typed *Something bad is happening*, and then, nothing more before she felt the need to return to a place where years had come and gone almost totally unnoticed by the outside world.

The trail passed through a clearing which had been made artificially wider sometime in the past decade, wide enough to hold a small white trailer, something cheaper and not as nice as the modular houses of the main colony, and two other buildings, one of which I recognized from Enrique Cuesta's photos, the other being long, squat and rectangular. The woods hugged this clearing tight on all sides. The sound of a very large electrical generator drowned out the

lesser, ghostly hum for the moment. The generator was housed in a shed jutting off awkwardly from the rectangular building. The footprints I'd tried to follow scattered in several directions now, and had outlived their usefulness to me.

I knocked on the door to the trailer first. Predictably, I got no response. The door was unlocked, though. So I went in.

The interior had been mostly become a workspace, through necessity more than design. Three oversized computer monitors blinked with activity, fed from a pair of expensive-looking laptops set on a folding card table. Books and papers were stacked on most other available spaces. An open bottle of Johnnie Walker was set neatly on top of a shelf packed with arcane but modern textbooks.

The monitors were tracking some sort of live, ongoing process, mechanical or digital, producing progressive seismic line graphs across the screens, along with slowly changing statistics corresponding to various unknowable acronyms.

I stepped past the work area and went down the thin, short hallway that led back to a small group of doors. The creaky floor was made so cheaply I could almost feel it give under my feet with every step that tracked snow further in. There was a bathroom, a niche with a stacked washer and dryer, and then what I assumed was the bedroom. Closed. I tapped on the door, and then opened it.

The bed was unmade, recently slept in. No real personal effects around to tell me who stayed here beyond some stray clothing piled about, men's clothing. I saw a clipboard on the nightstand, holding a small stack of pages together. These comprised a kind of chart, spread across multiple pages and drawn crudely by hand. Four columns, all of them filled with handwritten data in black pen. The columns were marked TIME AND DATE / STRENGTH OF CAGE SIGNAL / FED / NOT FED. Fifteen pages of this dating back a month. The columns marked STRENGTH OF CAGE SIGNAL noted gradually escalating numbers with unusual fractions. There were many notes in the margins, in writing so tiny I simply couldn't decipher them without my reading glasses; I'd left them at home. The compilation of the data had ended two days before. Under that last row of handwritten times and numbers, someone had added, in strikingly larger letters, an ominous standalone paragraph:

S. and S. are dead. Region Ten has gone into the mountains. I'm going to end what part of this I can. I'm letting Andronicus out. I have nothing more to say or be.

I left the trailer and crossed to that greenhouse-shaped building, which was about a hundred feet long. A gust of wind caught me off guard and snow blew off its roof and into my eyes. The light was starting to fade from the sky, and that made me nervous.

The lock on the big sliding door that allowed entry into the building, which I am sure I'd seen Sebastian Burke purchase, had been left unset. The door was already ajar, by about eight inches. I slid it two more feet along a thin metal rail to allow myself in, producing a shuddering scrape with a slight echo.

Even though the mechanism that was later proven to be producing the weird humming sound all around the area was now standing directly in front of me, the sound was still not one decibel louder or softer: a sonic phenomenon still being studied today, one which had taken

thirty years of research to master. The mechanism, whose parts stretched for about twenty yards and rose off the floor by about nine feet, didn't look like much. A million computer cables snaking among what looked like marching towers of servers, all wired to silent cooling fans, and then onward to a series of interlocking steel pipes that snaked underground. The book *The Curse of Intention* explains in detail how the pipes tunneled two hundred yards to the north, where the first of two dozen weather-proofed transmitters had been embedded in the earth the year before, eighteen inches deep, buried under thin fiberglass, spread out over an area two and a half miles wide.

By then, having skimmed the papers Gwen had brought with her to Little Oberon that day, I sort of knew what I was looking at, and what it was meant to do. But I didn't know how to interrupt the process, and I wouldn't have tried based on how ridiculous its premise was. The computers kept feeding data, and the machinery kept producing that inexplicable hum, fanning it out into the forest all around Beltridge. Stopping it could wait for someone who knew exactly what they were dealing with.

The interior area beyond the giant sound apparatus was full of stray computer and construction equipment, everything from bags of topsoil to more laptops in various states of assembly to a small bulldozer with Japanese markings on it. Flare guns, even, and three big collapsed tents that looked like they'd been taken down clumsily and just dumped there. And lying precariously on top of a small dorm fridge was a shotgun, a Remington. My father had bought me one when I was nineteen.

I opened that fridge. There were at least twenty tiny loose bottles of liquid, rust-colored liquid, each bottle with a rubber stopper, neatly arranged in rows of five. Small white labels held the name of the liquid, which was Xylazine, an animal tranquilizer. None of the seals on the bottles had been broken yet.

I closed the door and left the building. I figured there was no way to get into the taller structure, the one with the more sophisticated electronic lock. The windowless exterior of the place was built from cheap metal. It was a big glorified shed. But I went around to its front side just in case, just in case. And there I saw that the door was wide open. A good dusting of snow had collected just within, which told me it had been open for quite a while.

Taking those steps across the threshold into the last unexplored building of that compound introduced me more tangibly to the breakdown of sanity which had enveloped this place. The papers Enrique Cuesta had snuck out gave a snapshot version of Broderick Davith's work over thirty years with inducing panic and atypical aggression into various animal species through carefully crafted sonic disturbances. Some of these disturbances could cue defense mechanisms in the amygdala that were uncontrollable and that in some cases, led to something truly inexplicable: interspecies cooperation in reacting to perceived threat. And so, Sebastian Burkle and unknown elements of a group still calling themselves Region Ten had decided upon a very secret experiment in the mountains of Grand County, at the edge of the Rockies. The purpose was to empower the animals living within the forest for miles around into one chaotic but orchestrated moment of possibly violent rebellion. There was no better way to refer to the process than mass hypnosis. The hope, allegedly, was to force attention to the wrongful power imbalance human beings continued to create in the natural world. And after that one moment of shock was achieved, its creators would disappear and

the studies would continue somewhere unknown. And continue, and continue, the results, the findings passed on to the next generation of radical scientists who wanted to save the animal kingdom from its gradual enslavement, even if traumatic tactics were necessary.

It was madness, yes, and it couldn't possibly work, despite Broderick Davith's self-proclaimed success in 2007 with triggering baboons and antelope in Angola into a crazed assault on a volunteer group of protected and armed marksmen. He'd kept detailed notes on it all, poorly locked in his secluded trailer in Grand County, Colorado.

History was filled with scientific lunacy slowly forgotten amidst rationality, reason, and hard data. No one had anything real to fear from this aberrant idea, save for the animals themselves, so cruelly manipulated by these people's cynicism and God complexes. The giant machine next door, pumping out megawatts of sonic provocation, was nothing more than a big, misguided appliance whose plugs could be somehow pulled.

But inside that last building, where not even Burkle or Mehta or Enrique Cuesta knew precisely what was happening, *that's* where the lunacy had resulted in a more tactile nightmare, more so even than those cryptic words *S & S are dead*.

The lights were on in there, cold industrial lights shining down. A huge opaque cage took up half the interior, ten feet high. Two layers of the thickest black canvas had been stretched across metal bars all around. Inside that, a four-inch layer of soundproofing. The door to the cage, too, was wide open. I moved very cautiously toward the entrance, trying to peer in from a safe distance. Inside, the floor bore nothing but loose straw, sticks, and loose soil. A 45-degree chute connected to a rollaway stairwell beside the cage had been used to dump food into a trough. The air was tinged with the smell of spoiled meat. In one corner of the dark cage was a tri-level stack of perplexing machinery, and opposite it on the other side, a single oversized black machine whose face, a slatted vent, was angled toward the center of the enclosure. People smarter than I would later confirm what I did suspect right away, which was that I was looking at the remains of a more focused, more intimate version of the greater experiment going on in these woods.

To get any closer, to see any more detail, I would have had to step past a thin fan of blood on the floor, five feet across. It looked dry. Drag marks extended from the pool right up to the building's doorway, as if whatever had fallen or been killed there had subsequently been pulled outside into the cold. But the snow was mostly undisturbed beyond the threshold, which meant it must have happened before that morning's snowfall.

I had almost made it to the trailhead at the edge of the clearing by the time I remembered the shotgun on the dorm fridge far behind me, in that long cavern of a building that housed the sound generator. I'm not sure I would have had the courage to detour to it anyway. So I went back to the colony unarmed. I had no chance of getting all the way back to Educator's Lane moving as fast as my legs would carry me. I began my escape at a trot, reducing even that to a fast walk when I realized how much of a slippery effort the skinny winding trail represented, making any pace more ambitious a fantasy despite my growing panic. The white woods hid little; the branches of every tree on all sides were completely bare. I tried not to look left and right, but the sounds of winter's hands cracking through timberfalls and shaking ice crystals free to fall to the earth, those sounds which had been so easy to ignore on my way to the clearing, were now thick with threat, and my head turned toward every one to try to spot

what might be hiding nearby, or even tracking me. My breath came in shorter and shorter spurts, and tiny jabs of cold pain started to thump in my lungs. My fingers on the keypad of my phone were almost numb, but still I persisted in trying to send a signal out, every thirty seconds or so, creating a ritual to keep me calm. Send, send, send. When I was startled by a thick thatch of snow descending from a tall branch just a foot to my left because of a chance wind gust, I finally started to truly accelerate, slipping badly once but staying upright, following the human footprints as best I could. If there were inhuman ones that intertwined with them at any point, my conscious mind never processed them correctly. Photographs of the Spearmint Trail published later showed some though, yes.

One and two-tenths of a mile and then the trees broke. I was back in the open field behind the colony, and I was running across it, five hundred yards to the schoolhouse. I'd never gone there before, but I saw from so far away through the gloom of the growing dusk that the back door was partially open. Instinctively but uselessly, I yelled out Gwen's name, and I think maybe only the first half of it actually escaped my lungs, the other half drowned in exhaustion. I stumbled forward, absolutely sure that there was no safety in that dark place, that nothing good could be found there, and certainly no one to help me, but I felt horribly exposed so I went towards it anyway. Inside was simply better than outside.

The back door swung inward so easily it felt like the rotting hinges were about to simply break off. The schoolhouse's main room still had two rows of cheap plain desks bolted to the floor, judged to be too decrepit by local scavengers, I guess. The cracked, slimy windows looked in on nothing else, nothing else at all except some ripped, crumbling posters that had never been fully removed. One listed a long array of weights and measures, and another, ripped and faded but still usable, depicted the periodic table of the elements. The last of the daylight struggled to get into the room, tinted a sick yellow by the grime on the glass. Weeds grew through the warped floorboards. Every step I took produced a subsequent slight rattle from a wooden surface unknown to me.

There was a body on the floor, centered between the walls north and south, east and west, the body of a man with overdyed red hair, pure gray at the temples, elderly, dressed in a thick black hoodie and jeans. He was face down. Even if he wasn't, I wouldn't have been able to confidently identify him. I'd never seen a photograph of Broderick Davith before. His head was twisted at an angle so extreme, it looked like a child had become bored with a doll and gotten frustrated trying to hear what popping that head off would sound like. The neck was a dark pulpy mass of no definable shape, and most of the fingers of the man's left hand were nowhere to be seen. There were only the faintest marks underneath the body and around it to show how it had been dragged into the building, more than a mile from where this man had last taken in breath.

The hair on the back of my neck began to tingle strangely, my senses hyperaware. I turned around. Through the wide open door at the rear entrance to the schoolhouse, I could see back into the gently sloping field I had come from.

A large animal stood in the distance perfectly framed by the doorway, at first not much more than a dark smudge against the white of the snow where it left heavy pawprints. It turned in my direction of a shout from far away, a female shout.

The beast started to move immediately. It broke into a gallop almost as soon as I understood what it was, and I saw that I would not be able to make it to either door, in front of me or well behind me, in time to escape him.

It was a mountain lion, a dark reddish brown cougar, about three feet high and I'd say more than eight feet long, thick with muscle, and I think the demented weaponization process Broderick Davith had made it suffer through in the name of science had turned it into something crazed and lacking control. In contradiction to the normal habits of its species, it screamed barbarously. As it ran toward the threshold of the doorway, I could see how, in that one moment when I believe I had accepted my death, its hind legs rose in such an exaggerated but graceful way off the earth with each leaping stretch forward.

The hearing in my right ear temporarily failed when two rapid gunshots erupted from behind me. In reaction, the animal did something both horrifying and awe-inspiring. Instead of bolting to the left or right to veer off its path and evade the attack by vanishing around the side of the schoolhouse, it leapt. I saw the full stretched underside of its body in an instant, moving vertically.

It was probably twelve feet up to the first tier of the roof. I heard the animal's weight connect with the snow cover there with a thump and a skittering sound as it struggled to bring that weight to a stop.

I turned to see Richard Madden, many years older than I'd last seen him, holding a pistol, stunned by the unfamiliar power of its recoil, advancing deeper into the room from the front entrance. He shouted at me to run for the far door and get it shut. I snapped out of my shock and did so. I had to extend my body outside to grab the old door handle and wrench it back towards me. The wind was on my face for one scary second and then the heavy wood was connecting with the frame awkwardly. There was no way to keep it firmly shut; it was just in too bad a shape, but the animal likely couldn't get in. Its motion up on the roof manifested itself in just one more transitory sound: a heavy shifting as it crossed what was likely the meridian up there.

When I turned around again I saw that Gwen had shut the diagonally split main door from which they had both entered the room. She was wearing, I remember, a bright red coat that gelled too perfectly with a certain fairy tale. She ran forward and stopped, staring down at Davith's body, grimacing. Then she knelt and checked for a pulse, something I hadn't even bothered to do. The damage to Davith just seemed too awful, and he seemed so frail. I had guessed right.

For a moment all of us only listened. If the animal was still on the roof, we couldn't hear it. If it had jumped down already, the windows along the west wall were set too high to show what might be hiding, or stalking, just outside. We could only see beyond, past the field. Visually, we didn't have enough information to either move or stay.

I whispered to Richard, *We can't call for help here*. He looked lost, utterly overwhelmed. He was staring closely at Davith's wounds as if not understanding how human tissue could be made into something like that. The gun whose origin I didn't yet understand stayed gripped tight in his right hand.

He mouthed back silently: *We know*. Gwen got to her feet again. She had come here alone that day, and only upon getting a very bad vibe when no one answered her knocks at 104 Educator's Lane did she walk back down the road in search of a cell signal. It kept evading her and so she kept walking, all the way to Cannonade Road, then, becoming afraid, a half mile down to the service station which wasn't there when she'd lived in Little Oberon. Their cellphones were unable to connect too, so she'd asked to use their office phone, and she used it to call Richard Madden, hoping he could drive over from the University of Colorado right then to accompany her back in. He'd picked her up just a half hour before. I'd been the only living person in the colony until they came and were promptly delayed by an investigation of house number 104 that was more thorough than mine had been.

Richard now told me in a low voice that we were all going out, in the direction of the houses. It was the only course that made sense. Gwen and I followed him to the broken front door. Every step made so much sound.

Richard pressed his ear against the door briefly, holding a hand up to us to make sure we stayed absolutely silent. The wind whistled through the gap in the wood, a gap probably growing wider every year as the elements continued to harass that solemn, suffering little building. Richard seemed to hear something outside which made him hesitate, so he tried peering through the gap, but it was fruitless. I looked back once more at Davith's body, desks on either side of him, the ghost of an old, long chalkboard haunting the wall well behind him. In that ghost space, black blocky letters two feet high had been painted with a thick brush. Page 220 of Susan Roth's book reveals it to be the credo adopted in 1970 by the eco-terrorists calling themselves Region Ten:

NO MAN LEFT TO DEFILE THE EARTH

Someone had put it there very recently.

Richard finally seemed satisfied that it was time to go out. He pushed the door open. Its creak was mortifyingly loud. He took one step into the open air, Gwen and I right behind him.

Don't run unless I start to, he whispered to us. He went forward more boldly, seeming to have a gut feeling that our right side was the one we needed to most pay attention to. That's where most of his focus was clearly directed. I didn't take my eyes off the roof behind us.

Five yards through the snow, then ten yards. It was almost full dark now and visibility was poor. *Go ahead, slow*, Richard told us, and he stood in place and gestured us past him, turning back toward the schoolhouse, raising the pistol in expectation that something might happen.

We were twenty yards out of the schoolhouse and feeling no safer when Gwen and I winced at the sound of Richard's third shot. We spun around but saw nothing, our eyes moving frantically from point to point, up, down, both sides of the schoolhouse.

Richard, tensing up, had decided to fire a warning shot in the hopes the cat would never come closer from wherever it was. We stopped in our tracks and listened.

There, Gwen said. She had spotted something on the roof of the building. Partially obscured by small swirls of snow being blown around it, the large angular head of the mountain lion could be made out, then its shoulders. It was still up there, watching us. The gunshot did not

send it away, but it did not jump down towards us either. The sky beyond it was now tinged with orange, blue, purple.

Richard had the courage then to release a series of angry shouts in the animal's direction, simultaneously waving back at us to keep moving as he retreated. The cat, nothing more than a shadow thirty yards away, was perfectly still, looking like a gargoyle.

We never did run, but Richard never did lower the gun. We trusted him to keep the lookout, and he didn't fail. We closed the distance between ourselves and the cars fast. Our footsteps became firmer as we connected with the edge of Educator's Lane, and within ten seconds, we were all at the cars and the schoolhouse was just a silhouette in the distance. That gargoyle wasn't there now though; at some point it had vanished, and I will never be sure that we had seen a living thing on the roof at all, that it wasn't just an effect of the light on a ridge up there, a flaw turned into something terrible by our scurrying minds.

Our plan was organized in breathless half-sentences as we moved. We would leave in separate vehicles, Richard in his SUV, Gwen and I in her smaller car, rendezvousing at the grocery store a mile and a half away to call the police. Richard and Gwen didn't yet have the information I did about what lay down the Spearmint Trail, but they did know about what was inside 104 Educator's Lane, having forced their way in. In the living room of that little modular house, Richard had removed the pistol from the dead hand of Sebastian Burkle, who had killed his long-estranged lover Sandra Mehta three nights before in a haze of alcohol, jealousy, and a poisonous swirl of contradictory doomsday beliefs, turning the gun quickly on himself, leaving four shots left. Walking in on the wreckage of these lives just hours after the killing, Broderick Davith had turned and walked through freezing temperatures back down the Spearmint Trail. In his compound, he had written an emotionless farewell note at the bottom of some handwritten charts, then set free the subject of his experiment, which he'd paid handsomely to have captured. He opened its cage and just... stood back to see what happened.

Gwen opened the driver's side door of her car and I got in on the other side. Only when we slammed the doors shut did I finally feel safe. *It stopped*, Gwen said just before she started the engine, and before I could ask her what she meant, it sank in for me. She meant the humming in the air all around. It was, in fact, gone now. When that had happened, I didn't know. It could have been anytime in the last twenty minutes, half hour. It made me feel no better about anything.

Headlights on, we crept down Educator's Lane behind Richard's SUV at a very slow speed. Light flurries had begun to fall, and would fall for another two hours before becoming something more intense. We kept looking for the great cat on all sides of us. Thankfully, as we passed Dead Man's Curve and saw the bank of mailboxes well up ahead, there was nothing around us but the somber forest and the eternally bumpy road that now led to the broken dream of Little Oberon, a community of people destined to be lost to history just as the previous one had been, leaving only the schoolhouse still standing.

We had just about reached the turnoff the Cannonade Road when the sky was torn by a single electric crack louder than the gunshots that had damaged by hearing. Gwen cried out and hit the brakes and the back of the car fishtailed ever so slightly as we came to within three feet of tapping the bumper of Richard's SUV. He'd stopped much more smoothly. The crack

produced a metallic note in its split-second after-cloud that vanished fast. Likely heard for a mile around.

We could see Richard's silhouette turn back toward us and point twice to indicate that maybe we should just move onward. Gwen didn't look so sure, but Richard got moving again, turning left onto Cannonade Road. He accelerated confidently and began to drive toward the McMansions that way. They lay a mile and a half past Little Oberon's mailboxes. Gwen duplicated the turn, her headlights flashing past my own car, left behind on the shoulder.

But then, just ten or fifteen seconds later, she quickly applied her brakes again, more gently this time, careful about possible black ice on the road. She maneuvered us just off the pavement and onto the shoulder, where the snow had remained undisturbed by the rare passing vehicles.

I asked her what she was doing. I panicked a little when I saw Richard moving on ahead, his taillights getting smaller in the full dark.

Listen, Gwen said, and she did something that truly scared me, which was to put the car in the park and then shut off the engine. The headlights stayed on, casting a yellow glow on the tunnel Cannonade Road formed through the trees, and the empty horizon beyond.

I heard it right away. A distant, muffled drumming sound, like a thousand batons beating on the soft earth. Our eyes locked in the darkness of the car: Gwen, looking to me almost no different than she had back when she was thirty-five, while I had lost most of my hair and put on too much weight, leaving me breathless and exhausted. The sound rose and intensified quickly. We looked to our left, at the dense dark woods broken by Cannonade Road. That's where it was coming from mostly. That's where the trees were starting to tremble.

Without a word, Gwen reached out to my shoulder. She was urging me to get down. Uncertainly, I obeyed. She and I both shrank in our seats, leaning over toward each other so that our shoulders almost touched beside the gearshift, like we were two kids telling each other ghost stories on a sleepover. The look in Gwen's eyes, mine too I am sure, was one of sheer terror.

Once in everyone's life, my professor said decades ago, they find they've descended into a moment so insane it breaks their reality. The ones who make it through that moment are those who are quickest to stop disbelieving it and start reacting.

We heard but did not see the forceful breaking of the first masses of animals out of the forest and onto Cannonade Road, streaming all around us. Staring at each other in the dark, Gwen and I listened to their cacophony and never once lifted our heads. There came thousands of galloping footfalls, the weight of a horrible and unprecedented tide of angry, triggered creatures. Thumpings, barks, throaty wails and cries, the squawking of small birds, the screaming of bigger ones. The frame of the car began to shake as the stampede passed us on both sides, and had we cried for help it would have been drowned out.

We could hear the trees and the underbrush cracking and bowing before the tide of panic and rage. There was a bang as something connected with the front of the car as it rushed past blindly, crowded by a thousand other warm rushing bodies headed not across the road but

down it, toward civilization, toward the new community called Strawberry Fields, toward where Richard had driven his SUV.

Feet and paws and hooves slammed into the snow, all animals of the forest around Little Oberon coming together for this senseless rush, a ghastly miracle of cooperation. Twice, there was unmistakable whinnying and neighing, as of horses who had torn themselves from the stalls of nearby farms to join the tide. Gwen cried out once as something small struck her sideview mirror and cracked it.

The swarm only continued to escalate. Something canine howled as it went past us, and when it did so it caused some other beast to howl as well, and then yet another voice joined that one, full-throated, primal, and I thought I recognized that sound from old films of mountain wolves they'd shown to us back in school.

Stay down, stay down, that's what I kept telling myself. We heard the front bumper of the car torn away with no yelp of pain to go with it. Whatever had clipped it was moving too fast to slow down. I remember the screeching of a cat that couldn't have been much more than a house pet, and also a split-second scraping on the windshield of something else's thick, jagged nails. Somewhere in there came the most awful moment of all, when a thing that might have been half the size of Gwen's car thumped onto the hood, and then the roof right above us as it struggled to scamper over, rocking the entire car before it settled again. It was then, I think, that I began to laugh crazily.

For eleven minutes by the dashboard clock we cowered in fear, even after the animal swarm abated and the scamperings, the thrashings, the frenzied bolting that roiled the earth around us tapered off. Eventually individual paws and hooves could be heard, still running at full speed to join the mob. We remained frozen in place. I wanted to be rescued, choppered out of there, and sedated all without seeing anything, because if I didn't see anything, maybe I wouldn't go mad.

At 5:39, still shaking badly, tears running down our cheeks, we finally lifted our heads above the dashboard. We saw bent trees on the left and right, and the chewed turmoil the angry animals had made of the once-smooth snow cover all around with their epic painted landscape of overlapping prints. Gwen's headlights had stayed on through the whole thing. The road ahead was empty and dark. The quiet lasted about fifteen seconds, and then, the first sirens began to wail in the distance.

The attack lasted just one hour and fifteen minutes before the effect that had sent the animals rushing into their confrontation with humankind slowly released its hold on their small, corrupted minds. For the most part, they were again as God or creation had made them, but far from their homes, scattered, disoriented. Twelve people lost their lives: three through being trampled, four through maulings, three in traffic accidents and two killed when their Cessna struck a pack of feral boars on the runway of Diamond Run Airfield. Richard Madden lived, uninjured, though his SUV had flipped when he was forced to swerve to avoid a horde of oncoming bodies, this one from the south.

Today, there are literally hundreds of hours of video from the disaster online. I've never watched a moment of it. During those hours, hundreds of animals were killed as the people of Beltridge and Clover Pocket reacted in frantic self-defense, and I have to say, it's those

creatures I think about now, all these years after, those creatures I really mourn for, and them alone.

On the fourth anniversary of the night of the catastrophe, Gwen and her husband Roger, who had been seemingly cured of his physical sufferings through a program of treatment designed by Sandra Mehta and based partially on the sonic vibration research of Broderick Davith, were finally going to drive from Nebraska for a visit—but something came up, they couldn't make it, again. So at midnight, by the fire, I alone raised a drunken toast to the beast Davith had named Andronicus. Like the phantoms of Region Ten, he was never trapped or found in the mountains of Grand County. Maybe he still lives today, having long since shaken off the madness that consumed him in November of 2022, free to roam, hunt, pursue, and even love in his way, watching silently over a small part of the world which still belongs to him.

And this one's to you, Gwenivere, so far away. I can't seem to stop being bitter that big adult life keeps on adding distance... but here I am, smiling like an ass just thinking we might listen to records again, a little, sometime.

We don't need no selfies together. You're my friend.

cleanse

JOUR 850: Criminal Confessions as Literature. Two credits. In this four-week summer session, Whittington Program students will analyze lengthy real-world pieces of spontaneous confession from American convicts imprisoned between 1968 and 2022. In studying these prose-like, intensely personal histories on the page, and the paranoia and delusions some of the subjects reveal, students will examine the ethics and boundaries of publishing controversial nonfiction. Texts to be studied include the East Lansing Strangler Manifesto, the police confessions of Eliza G. Norris, the sentencing protests of serial murderer Mark Linson Libby, and the extraordinary statement of the recently convicted Randall Shiggis.

My name is Randall Shiggins. My stage name since I turned forty is Randy Shilling. Four hours ago, in the middle of the night, my sister called me from the side of Galleon Road and told me about sitting in soup. I've been at stupider auditions, but I never did get the story of why they made her sit in soup. I guess there's no reason that would really make sense. Audrey told me, and I could barely hear her, that she was thumbing back to Mom and Dad's, all the way to Salton Sea. Said she was never coming back to this stupid town. Didn't seem to care that I couldn't possibly afford the rent. She was doing that thing she always did, looking at the glass half empty because neither one of us had gotten an acting job in all the years we'd been trying. She said it was because we sucked, but I don't know. Mom and Dad never told us we sucked, and they were movie stars in the seventies. Well, TV movie stars. But Audrey was just uncooperative. I mean, it's the industry. They tell you to sit in soup, you sit in soup, you sit in hot fudge, you sit in the Third Reich if they tell you to, it's called *building a résumé*, it's called *money*.

She kept breaking up over the phone because all either of us have is a discount thing. She said, *You've gotta get out of there*. I thought she meant because I'd get evicted, so I told her maybe I'd ask Moped to move in but she said it wasn't that. It was that the laundry was out of control now. As if I didn't know that. She'd promised me on Tuesday that we were just about to get to it. I was actually kind of getting geared up for it, but now she said we were lying to ourselves. We'd let it get too far out of hand. It was dangerous now.

Dangerous. That was just a myth, I said. *Just throw some things in a bag and come east*, she said. *Don't even open that door*. But Mom and Dad are like ninety now. I hung up on her. She was just trying to scare me. Dangerous. She made me so mad. Just last week she promised to help me memorize Al Pacino's God monologue from *The Devil's Advocate* for class and here she was trying to hitchhike a hundred and fifty miles and eating up my phone minutes complaining about her career, like *I* hadn't had to dress up as a plunger *twice* for two different commercial tryouts in 2019. The second time they didn't even have a costume for me, I had to make one myself.

She killed our dream, just like that.

I couldn't get back to sleep. That thing about the laundry. It was just, you know, other errands always kept popping up and it got depressing after a while just thinking about it, and she kept throwing hers into the bin and we started mixing, and the laundromat's all the way over on 13th and they closed for a week because of a fire and eventually... eventually we fell so far behind that we didn't know what to do.

I got up off the futon and went into the bathroom. Turned on the light. I guess we should have taken action as soon as we couldn't get to the sink anymore because we had so many dirty clothes on it. I'd started washing my hands in the kitchen. I don't know what Audrey was doing.

There sure was a lot of laundry to do. To save money and time on washing, Audrey would take people's hand-me-downs or take stuff from the Catholic mission down the street and just throw underwear out, and I picked up on that trick too, and you don't notice the accumulation right away, it kind of sneaks up on you. The dirty clothes in the bathroom were everywhere.

On the floor, on the towel rack, hanging over the shower curtain, stacked on the side of the tub. I'd taken to shoving some of the bulkier stuff into the cabinets beneath the sink, but those were bulging out now, they wouldn't close right.

Pants. Socks. Shirts. Sweaters. Bras. More pants. You get the idea. You know what laundry is. There's not a person on Earth, not in L.A. or the rainforest or Stonehenge who doesn't know what laundry is.

Staring at it now though, I got a bad feeling I'd never gotten before. Audrey had gotten to me. It was possible she was right. You heard things, you saw things if you scrolled through the right parts of the internet.

I shut off the light and closed the bathroom door. I never did that, we always left it open. But it felt better to have it closed now. I got back on the futon and I pulled my blanket up over my head and turned in the other direction so I wouldn't have to look down the hall where the bathroom was. I should have been thinking about rent and worrying that if Moped had to move in, he might wind up stabbing me again, but all I could think about was the stuff behind that door.

Eventually I fell back asleep and I dreamed there was someone knocking, standing outside in the hallway, and I opened up and Willem Dafoe came running down the hall, you know, the actor, and he was grinning and he said *Isn't this a wonderful day! They're letting us all be naked everywhere from now on! The bill has passed, the bill has passed!* And in the dream I was like, *Dude, I don't want to see that, put something on,* and he got real cold and serious and he said to me: *You have nothing clean,* and he had fangs.

The text beep woke me up. It was Audrey. Her message was all in caps. It said NOT ONE PERSON HAS STOPPED FOR ME. It was exactly 2:15 in the morning.

So that meant I had to get in the car. Galleon Road started about two miles away and went all the way to Pecos Hills. I stood up to put my sneakers on, I'm real good at squishing my feet back in without having to re-tie them. And I saw that the bathroom light was on.

Strange. My first thought was, OK, Audrey came back, but she wasn't on her mattress. So I called out to her, but she didn't respond.

I pushed the bathroom door open real slow. It was different, real different now. The laundry was gone. Every bit of it. The pants. The socks. The shirts. The sweaters. The bras. There was nothing on the sink or in the tub or balanced real careful on the towel rack. Nothing crammed below the sink. You could even see the stuff in the bottom cabinet now, the spare light bulb and the broken remote control and the smoke detector.

I said out loud, *She must have...* but I stopped. Must have what? Come back here in the dead of night and dragged the laundry out in four trips?

I saw a line of vertical light beside the front door and I realized it was open, just a crack. In the hallway outside the apartment, just silence. Mrs. Blank in 1E and the creepy Montag triplets in 1C were all tucked away asleep, I guess.

There was a single sock on the floor near the entrance to the building. I crept down the hallway down to it, being careful not to step on the spot on the wood that creaked so loud it

sounded like the Titanic flipping over. The sock was one of the novelty ones Mom had sent us for our fortieth birthday. It was blue and had Pacman on it. The front entrance was open, about two feet, against the rules. Phipps Properties would *crucify* you if you left that door open.

I went back, locked the apartment, and headed out. I was frightened. Like I said, your read things on the internet sometimes about what could happen.

We hadn't started the Cavalier in a couple of months, not since it failed inspection, but it did get going on the third try. It sounded like Bela Lugosi if he was a hundred years old and trying to climb up a sliding board. The needle was a little bit below the E, but not too much. I pulled away from the curb beside the apartment building and turned onto Bancha Avenue.

Bancha led through a couple of miles of body shops and dive bars out to Woolsey. I thought about stopping for a soda refill at Marvelous Musa's because it was only thirty-nine cents. But I didn't want to take a chance detouring even a half mile so low on gas.

Turned out to be a moot point anyway. The Cavalier gave up the ghost about fifty yards before the turnoff. I don't know whether it was out of gas or it was the alternator again. Didn't matter. I cranked the wheel to the right and got the car into an empty parking lot beside me, a familiar one. The little square cement building had closed at midnight and the windows were dark. The sign on it said: SPARKLING CAT LAUNDROMAT.

I guess I should have found where I was ironic or even funny, but I didn't. I texted Audrey back, told her to start walking back west. Maybe she'd only gotten a few miles. I sat there in the dark, waiting for an answer.

It was creepy, the laundromat with no lights on. All those big round mouths on the dryers, lined up in a row behind the glass. Sparkling Cat was the bane of my existence. Audrey's too. Half the machines always broken. Never draining right. People overloading them all the time or wandering off and leaving their clothes. Your quarters getting spat out over and over again. Drug addicts asking you for money. Not enough pushcarts. Some variant of *Judge Judy* always on the TV, or if you're really lucky, one of fifty *Law and Order* knockoffs from ten years ago. And what was it all *for*? I ask you that. So we don't smell bad? Why don't we just all agree, mutually, to smell bad, then we'd be free of this insanity *forever*.

Audrey didn't text back for some reason. I tried calling her. No answer. Fifteen minutes. Very few other cars went by. A black dog with no collar wandered out from behind the building, not giving a damn about me, and trotted down the shoulder of the road. Never had to wring out a sock by hand in its life.

I had one option left. I went to the back of the car and popped the trunk. Candace Marie was in there, untouched for a year now. I'd felt so guilty about stealing her I'd kept her in the trunk, not knowing what to do. Audrey gave her a name just to make me feel even worse about the whole thing. I lugged her out and re-attached her front wheel. Her tires were kind of soft but she was usable. I never wanted to steal Candace Marie, but money was tight last year. Real tight. I made ten dollars from acting in 2021. I was a zombie in a student film. It has eleven views on YouTube.

Off down Galleon I rode, the first real exercise I'd gotten since swordsmanship class. Woolsey's businesses petered out and it went from four lanes down to two. Then a cruddy residential part, and then, pretty much open land. Even a tree once in a while. It was pretty much the country. Zero traffic. The two or three times a car came up behind me, I zigged over to the other side. I don't trust anybody.

I got about three miles and then twenty-five years of smoking caught up to me. I had to get off and push for a while. It was pretty out there, beside the fields, with the hills in the distance, and a full moon, and the sound of crickets.

I saw someone lying on the side of the road up ahead. I let Candace Marie drop and I approached them. It was so dark, I couldn't see much. Couldn't even read the mile markers. I went past one, those mysterious mile markers. Dad used to say they were really secret signals used by the Masons.

It was Audrey. She was lying face up in the dirt, just off the shoulder where the grass started. She wasn't breathing. Her eyes looked off into nothing. They looked puffy and sick and two shades lighter, as if their pigment had swum away in terror through her panicking blood. She had something wrapped around her neck real tight, knotted. It was the sleeve of a sweatshirt. The first thing I did was try to untie it, but it was so hard to do, the knot was so tight. It had cut off her breathing entirely. The sweatshirt I recognized. It was a freebie we got from selling our plasma a couple of years ago. It had the logo of the medical place on it, a happy clown. A blotch of dried chili had blacked out one of its corneas.

In the end, I couldn't get the knot undone. I had to keep jostling Audrey's head around when I dug my nails into the fabric, and I kneaded it and clawed at it and it was too horrible a thing to do. I stood up and looked around. No cars had passed in the last five minutes.

About fifty yards up ahead, there was a tilted streetlamp with a weak bulb. It threw this pool of yellow light down on the edge of the road. I saw an object at the far edge of that pool. It was a pair of Audrey's yellow sweatpants.

As soon as I caught sight of it, it withdrew out of the light, fast, slithering into the darkness beyond without making even a whisper of a sound.

I had a choice between going after it and trying one more time to revive Audrey. It doesn't matter what I did in the end, does it. And it doesn't matter that I didn't call the police just then. No, I didn't, because I thought maybe if the laundry saw me on the phone... I was defenseless after all, out there in the dark on Galleon Road.

No, I needed to be smarter than that. I needed to do some acting if I wanted to get out of there alive. And there was a different call I had to make. So I got back on the bike and I turned around and I started pedaling back the way I came. I tried to keep my mind perfectly blank.

In about a quarter mile there was a turnoff to a gravel road that sloped down to the Sickle City Fairgrounds. I took it and coasted through the dark down a gentle dirt slope, curving toward an enormous open grass tract. Vast space opened up all around, empty fields under the sky, so I could see in all directions and feel a little safer.

It was week two of the Poisoned Popes Renaissance Fair. Audrey and I had both auditioned to be tavern riff-raff. Nobody ever called us back. In the distance there were huts and pop-up canvas storefronts, lightless and locked, and past those, a jousting track and a bandshell. I bisected a row of two dozen Port-o-Johns. I stepped right into the middle of a field of phantoms.

Strung along row upon row of stout rope lines, and fluttering and flapping in the rising wind, was a talkative sea of capes and corsets and chemises and coats and vests and doublets and breeches and tunics—costumes for an entire 15th century village. I stopped in my tracks, but there was nothing to fear from them, surely. They were drying out, newly appeased. Harmless. For now. The wind made it all do a clumsy, tethered dance, each piece trying to touch and cling to the one beside it.

I was praying I still had Anders's number in my phone. And there it was, right at the top of the list, like providence. I dialed the number. Despite the ridiculous hour of the night, Anders picked up on the first ring, like he hadn't even been asleep. But that was Anders, of course. Intellectually brilliant and permanently stoned. I hadn't talked to him since he'd helped me memorize Jack Black's opening monologue from *Kung Fu Panda*, but he didn't care. Anders didn't care about anything but Australian exploitation movies, pot, and his beard.

I asked him if he'd ever finished his documentary about laundry, the one he'd sold his chickens to finance. He told me that his camera battery had died so he had to stop, but he'd been getting freaked out anyway, about the things he was finding out. I needed to know if he'd actually found real evidence that laundry can become sentient. He told me that absolutely yes, he'd found evidence. He had talked to many people.

What do you expect? he said over the phone, probably sitting in the dark and just staring out his window over the neighborhood like he did, *what do you expect from anything or anyone that is so scorned? From the beginning of time, demonized like the plague, across every culture, every historical epoch. It's despised, absorbing our vitriol and our stains beyond any level a human group would rationally accept before lashing out. Sometimes when it gathers, he said, its consciousness spreads from fabric to fabric. It becomes an organized swarm of anger that's no longer interested in solutions. It's interested in bloodshed.*

There were cases. The media didn't pay attention. Two dead at a prison laundry facility in Olympia. A woman with dementia living alone in Biloxi who keep forgetting to do a wash until her own towels smothered her in the night. Towels. Of course.

What are we supposed to do? I asked Anders, and he said to me: *Do a load once in a while, how hard is it?*

But it *is* hard. I don't have a machine, and it gets too busy at the coin-op and there's bleach streaks in the washers and if the change dispenser is down there's some stupid scammy paycard thing you have to load online *if* the website's up, and there's a Lost Dog flyer that's been there for six *years*... oh god, lugging the bag down the sidewalk day after day and when you get there the dryers are full and... it's got to *stop*, where's technology? We can print a potato but *I'm still spending half my life washing my clothes!*

Where's this all going, with the laundry, the killing laundry, I asked Anders. He said he didn't know, but he wasn't taking any chances. Took a load down to Commander Kleen's every two

days, every two days, a mile walk each way. *Eighty percent of life, he said, is knowing when you're vanquished. Do you agree?*

Yes. Yes.

I hung up and I pushed Candace Marie slowly back up the hill. It was hard. Once I was back on the road, I turned left and I began to pedal again. Twice, cop cars sped by me, sirens blaring, one headed toward the city, one away from it.

When I got back to the Sparkling Cat where the car was, I stopped to rest. A text suddenly popped up. It was from Anders. LOCK THE DOORS, he typed.

Instead of riding home, where I thought the laundry might be waiting for me, I rode down lonely Jackfruit Avenue, everyone asleep in their cheap modular houses, then through Coatsdale and past lonely Sickle City Park. The park had always been a place I could go and think, a place it seemed like no one but me knew about.

I took the little wooded bike trail in for the first time, and almost right away, I saw lights through the trees. I knew what they were; there was nothing unusual or alarming about them. But when I saw what they were shining on now, I stopped. I held my breath, watching.

After a time I turned around very slowly. I pushed myself away, coasting, afraid that pedaling would make too loud a sound. Only when I got back onto Galleon did I understand what I had to do.

The clerk at the Seven Eleven on Cannon Street barely noticed me come in, so performing my little theft was super easy. To cover it I even bought myself a small Slurpee, all I could afford. Grapefruit flavor. That was always Audrey's favorite.

In the dark windows of the closed Sparkling Cat laundromat, which used to be open twenty-four hours before there were too many violent incidents there, I looked at my pallid reflection, outlined neatly by the sputtering light of the bulb over the front door. I unscrewed the lid of the little bottle of Tide and dipped my fingers into the cool blue wet murk. When I was finished what I needed to do, I got back on the bike and I returned to Sickle City Park. This time I was much, much bolder than the first.

I parted the trees at the end of the bike trail and there it was, the unnamed community amphitheater. It used to be where I would come and daydream about being an actor, on stage or TV, or maybe a video game. I even once rehearsed Faye Dunaway's coat hanger monologue from *Mommie Dearest* when there when no one was around, which no one ever was. The amphitheater was just twenty stone rows curving around a grassy bowl, didn't even have a backdrop, and the stage was just cracked cement, and nothing had ever been staged there. Sickle City was about as artistic as a book of Garfield cartoons.

Now, though, now the two lamplights flanking the stage area—the ones they'd had to install to keep addicts from shooting up in the park—shone down on a packed house for the first time. I could barely even see the stone bleachers. They were covered by dirty clothing of every conceivable kind, from every conceivable source, and not just clothing but sheets, pillowcases, patio chair cushions, a sleeping bag or two, what looked like a car mat, even a

Canadian flag with mud all over it. But mostly pants. Socks. Shirts. Sweaters. Bras. The soiled machine washables of the world. Even from a hundred feet away, the smell was... not great.

And on the stage, the largest mound of quilts human eyes had ever seen looked out over the audience. It rose twelve feet high. Before I approached I merely stood and listened, and I could sense the communication going back and forth, could feel it in my fingertips and my knees somehow, the chatter and the debate and the instructions moving from weave to weave along thin lines of energy and sensation that we were not meant to know. I was witnessing—maybe even hearing—the beginning of it all, the gathering, not just in this city but dozens or even hundreds of others, on this night when my sister would not be the only victim of their intended crusade.

I walked forward. I was still afraid, oh yes. It could have killed me in seconds. But it didn't. Step by step, I descended from the top of the bowl down the grass steps toward the stage, not even looking left and right. I held my head high so as not to make it known how terrified I was. I had stripped to the waist.

I stopped in front of the towering, moldy-smelling mound of quilts which, if it had been clean, freshly laundered and ironed, would have been beautiful to behold instead of monstrous. The liquid detergent I had painted my face, my neck, my arms, and my entire torso with dripped onto the cement.

I turned to the static audience. I raised my arms slowly, in supplication, my palms outward in peace. The wind rose again, lifting the corners of pillow cases and wrestling uniforms. Then I turned once more to face the quilt beast, gazing up at its peak, and I sank to my knees delicately, tiny rocks digging into my jeans.

I leaned forward. I pressed a cheek against a soft spot, cool and slightly damp, in order to leave a symbolic kiss of detergent there. A seahorse-shaped bloodstain inches from my face seemed very old, stubborn, not the kind you can just blot and treat and wish away. Old and permanent. Or maybe it was new, from this very night.

I bent at the waist and clasped the grass peeking through the cement. I waited for the death blow I hoped would not come—for had I not shown myself to understand what was before me, identify with its anger and present myself as not just a supplicant, but a willing and able aide?

O Conqueror, let me wipe away this costume so you can see the stains I have always carried. Let me walk with you, into the maze of two-lane blacktop, the wind fierce at our back. Washcloths and comforters and unpardonable humans alike, slithering and tumbling and dancing... united for the battle between the only two true factions: the dirty and the clean.

Is It That Time Again?

MAN (*leaving a voice message*)

Hey, it's me. Something really odd, I was here in the basement late last night, I was sorting all this junk out from the move-in, and I was listening to *BBC World News* on this little clock radio I forgot I had. It was just before one... and someone appeared outside. There's a small rectangular window that lets in a little light from the yard during the day. It was this woman in a long dress. She bent down to peer in, and I just caught a glimpse of her, it was so dark out there. She got back up and disappeared after maybe two seconds. By the time I got to the window she was gone. I had to kind of get on tiptoe to really see out. But what she was doing, who knows. Gave me kind of a shock.

Anyway, I'll call you tomorrow after I have another go at cleaning this place up.

MAN (*leaving another voice message*)

OK, it just happened again, pretty much exactly twenty-four hours since the woman came the first time, and something is deeply weird here. She was wearing the same thing. I couldn't hear her but I happened to be crossing the basement to the dryer. I looked up right away this time. She must have come from around the side of the house instead of right across the lawn. I would have seen that. She bent down real fast just like last night, and she peered into the window again and then, an exact repeat, as soon as her knees touched the grass and she had a one- or two-second look in at me, she got back to her feet, moved past the window, toward the north side of the house. Gone.

What did I see this time... her hair was long, kind of unwashed. She had, I swear, paper shoes on, I think, paper slippers. It was just too dark out to see any details of her face or anything.

But the real thing is that I looked at the clock radio when she left. And I wouldn't have even done that, but last night I remember she came just as the *BBC World News* was playing its end music, which would have been at about, you know, 12:56, 12:57. So she's been gone for five minutes now, which means I saw her at 12:56 or 12:57.

I'm looking out the window here, I'm standing on the laundry basket...

Call me when you get this, all right?

WOMAN (*on phone*)

What do you mean, "She had *no* reaction"?

MAN *(on phone)*

I mean, she didn't flinch. I was waiting for her right inside the window this time, I planned it. I came down here special when I thought it might happen. I was standing on this stepstool, and I banged on the window as soon as she appeared. I yelled at her, but there was not a single variance in her movement, it's like she was programmed to do what she does.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

So she...

MAN *(on phone)*

She looked in, got right back up, and went away.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

Off behind the corner of the house.

MAN *(on phone)*

Yep. And by the time I get up these stairs and across the kitchen and out onto the porch where I can actually see something in the dark, she could be anywhere.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

You need to get video.

MAN *(on phone)*

Yeah, clearly. I'll do it tomorrow night, I guess.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

You see her face this time?

MAN *(on phone)*

A little.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

What's she look like?

MAN *(on phone)*

Just... pale.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

I have 12:56 now.

MAN *(on phone)*

Yeah, we're pretty much aligned.

WOMAN (*on phone*)
You're recording?

MAN (*on phone*)
I am recording. What do you put the odds at, of her coming back again right on time?

WOMAN (*on phone*)
I'm sure she will.

(Long pause.)

MAN (*on phone*)
All right, the clock says 12:57. I'm gonna put you on speaker and then turn the phone camera on, let's see if you stay connected.

WOMAN (*on phone*)
It's 2022, I think it'll work.

MAN (*on phone*)
There.... Hello?

WOMAN (*on phone*)
I'm here.

MAN (*on phone*)
OK, it works.

(Long pause.)

MAN (*on phone*)
Oh Jesus, here she is, hold on...!

(Long pause.)

MAN (*on phone*)
Okay, I got it.

WOMAN (*on phone*)
The whole thing?

MAN (*on phone*)
Yeah, let me just play it back here, make sure... OK, I'm sending it over.

WOMAN (*on phone*)
Take me off speaker.

MAN (*on phone*)
You get it?

WOMAN *(on phone)*

Yeah. *(pause)* It's real dark. *(pause)* Jesus, that's spooky. Go up right now, see if you can see her up there.

MAN *(on phone)*

All right. I'll call you back if something happens.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

Are you even in the basement?

MAN *(on phone)*

Yes.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

It just turned 12:56 like thirty seconds ago.

MAN *(on phone)*

I'm aware.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

Well, what are you doing this time, are you videotaping?

MAN *(on phone)*

Shhhhhhh....

WOMAN *(on phone)*

What am I listening for?

(Long pause.)

WOMAN

12:57. She didn't come?

MAN *(on phone)*

I'm not sure.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

What do you mean, you're not sure?

MAN *(on phone)*

I'm sitting on the floor under the window, but I'm facing the staircase. I didn't even look out.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

What are you hoping to accomplish by that?

MAN *(on phone)*

I don't know.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

So she's probably gone. Didn't sense anything?

MAN *(on phone)*

I did. I *did* sense her out there.

WOMAN *(on phone)*

Why didn't you go out in the yard this time, wait for her?

MAN *(on phone)*

Because I find it extremely scary. Can you drive here?

WOMAN *(on phone)*

No.

MAN *(on phone)*

Am I in that rhyme, is that's what's happening?

WOMAN *(on phone)*

What rhyme?

(Long pause.)

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh....

(Then, rhythmically, in the cadence of a child's rhyme:)

"They'll peek
five times
from graves
they've been...

but after that,
they'll creep within."

Yes. Probably.

MAN *(on phone)*

That was the fifth time, right? One, two, three... four... five.

MAN *(leaving another voice message)*

I'm standing out here on the lawn. Here I am. 12:56. Here I am.

(Long pause.)

12:57.

(Long pause.)

So cold out here... I put on this dumb yellow sweatshirt I hate, but it's not enough.

(Long pause.)

"They'll peek
five times
from graves
they've been...

but after that,
they'll creep within."

(Long pause.)

12:58. No sign of her. I'm going back down to the basement.

(We hear the man walking around the house, opening a screen door, entering, walking, then opening another door. Then, his footsteps on bare stairs, descending. They slow to an uneasy stop. He has seen something. A clock ticks.)

MAN
Hello...?

Who are you?

(We hear shuffling footsteps on cement... as if the feet are in paper shoes. They move closer, then stop.)

MAN
Turn around.

(A long pause, then the feet begin to shuffle much faster. We hear an otherworldly emittance from the ghost's throat... then cut.)

NEW HOMEOWNER *(leaving a phone message)*

Something really strange happened last night. I was in the cellar. There's just so much painting and restoration that needs to be done down there. But anyway... I was down there

and all of a sudden, some man appeared at the little window, gave me the shock of my life. He knelt down out there and he looked in, and then he got back up again almost right away and took off.

All I really remember now is that he had on a yellow shirt... sort of a... pale face from what I could see.

It's a great neighborhood, so I *assumed* I wouldn't have anything to worry about. The year is off to a creepy start, I guess. Happy 2089 to me.

Anyway, give me a call when you get a chance, OK? Thanks.

hitcher / prodigal / contestants

So it was right around here, I remember that farm... I was cruising along around midnight and someone had broken down on the side of the road, so I pulled over. It was a guy, his timing belt was shot, it was done. He knew it, so I offered to give him a ride up to Embree. He was only about forty, but he walked with a cane, pretty slow, and the entire left side of his face was—not bandaged but kind of sleeved, therapeutically, this black sleeve. Quiet guy. We're driving along, and he said he's on his way to a teacher's conference and he says, 'About my injury...' like he sort of knew I was wondering about it.

He said it happened in Tasmania, six months before. He was down there teaching natural healing techniques or something and he was walking a mile outside of a fishing village a little after dawn, just a morning walk.

He asked me if I'd ever heard of the bull ant. *Myrmecia*. Very aggressive, nasty ant, with an ugly sting. He said if you cut one in half, the head and the tail will fight each other.

So here comes this guy, walking, he said the woods were cloaked in mist that morning, so he wasn't quite where he thought he was. He didn't know that in the timber all around him, two big bull ant factions were living, only about fifty yards from each other, always vying for the resources. There'd been a drought, it was only getting worse.

What he also didn't know was that there was a fungus infecting ants all over the coast. It was attacking the brain function that controlled their odor detection mechanism, it was making them even more aggressive. It was turning them into zombies in a way; their brains were being fooled into thinking what was food and what wasn't, and they were sinking their jaws into anything: plants, wood, dirt, animals, and locking there for dear life. Then after the fungus slowly killed the ant, it consumed them and sought out a new host.

He walked into an area where there had been rising skirmishes between the ant colonies as the drought intensified. Ants negotiate, you know, they send out communicators, but in this

case, it wasn't working. The whole thing was being studied by a pair of entomologists from Brazil; they were just about to put video cameras in the trees.

This teacher heard something off to his left, a disturbance in a pile of timber, and he looked and he saw a black mass coming towards him on the ground. He turned to run and from the other direction, here came the opposing army. This was the morning they were going to battle to the death. Something about the barometer or the wind maybe set them off. It turned out more than half of them had been infected by the fungus. They were insane.

He had no time to make it out of there. He looked down and saw hundreds of bull ants flow over his boot. Said it all made no sound, not even a whisper.

He didn't remember anything after that except one image, one image in all that chaos. It got distorted in his memory. Maybe it was just from a dream after he lost consciousness, but he remembered falling to his knees in the dust and holding a hand up to the sky. The sun was burning its way through the clouds, a silver ring, and he saw on his wrist a ball of ants, all locked in one frantic battle. This ball began to tumble down his arm toward his face, end over end. Those ants believed themselves to be on the side of some great mountain maybe. When he woke up he was near death, massive blood loss. Months of rehab.

I had to ask him, *Can you even go near insects, of any kind now?* He smiled, in kind of a creepy way. Rolled up his shirt sleeve. The skin of his forearm was patchy and the color wasn't right at all. He had a tattoo of an ant there. He said his skin was in too bad a shape to get it up any higher.

He had four tattoos, one marking every major event in his life. His daughter's face would have to be redone someday, he said. All the bites took it away in the attack. To get off the topic, I asked about the other two tattoos. One was Japan. He wasn't smiling anymore when he mentioned the last one. Quite the opposite. It was a shark.

Here's the sign, right here. That's the only sign there is for Turpin, four miles down that way. I'd just wanted to stop and see if they had a gas station that sold iced tea or something, so I turned down there. They had a couple places... one diner, a few churches, but if there are four hundred people who live there I'd be surprised.

It was nine o'clock on a Sunday night and nobody was on the streets, nothing was open. I spotted a soda machine outside a little general store and I got a drink, and this woman walked over to me from her house across the street. She was polite, I guess, but she wanted to know why I was there, where I was from. Seemed pretty nervous. She looked around to make sure no one was watching and she said, *Here, please, come around to the side of the building, I have to tell you something.*

She told me someone who used to live there in Turpin was coming back to town that night, someone who'd been in jail for a long, long time. Fifty-eight years. Fifty-eight years in jail, a man named Evans. He was put in jail for... she wouldn't even tell me. She was talking real fast

and she seemed a little unhinged. It was something involving kids and birds. Birds. I had to imagine someone twenty-two years old sentenced to sixty years and having to serve almost every bit of it, it was that bad, evil—she used that word, evil. I could not imagine what that would have been.

And the town hadn't forgotten him. Not a lot of people leaving Turpin for the big city over the generations, and stories got passed down. They'd found out that he was finally due to be released, and someone from town had gone up to see him in jail up in Ranchercola and advise him not to return because someone people, some older people, would not allow him one step inside that border. And he'd apparently said he had every intention of going right back and living in the place he grew up in. The woman said to me, *They're going to kill him right on the street, they've arranged it.* So I said, *Look, you need to go to the police* and she said, *They know! They're going to help them!*

She was asking me to believe that the townspeople were going to kill this, what, eighty-year-old man. There was nothing she wanted of me but for me to just go, so I never really knew her role in this.

I got in the car, and at first for a little while I just cruised around the town, looking. Nobody out walking a dog or maybe leaving to head out to the highway. None of that, just lights out. Even the dive bar in town was closed. But then, there they were. I went past Turpin Elementary School and there were... must have been about thirty people standing under a lamppost in the parking lot where the buses probably lined up. Real strange mix of adults and very old people. And about half of them were carrying something, something blunt. A lot of heads turned my way as I rolled by.

I drove back toward the highway, it was time to get out of there. And as I'm driving toward it, I'm on Route 113, it's just windy and dark. I see a man walking on the shoulder coming my way, my headlights just catch him. Old man, bald, kind of stooped, a little infirm, in jeans and a black sweatshirt, he's got a backpack. Walking toward Turpin, all alone on a Sunday night. I passed him and I couldn't help myself, I stopped the car in the road and idled there and looked back.

He had stopped and turned. Maybe he was thinking I was going to offer him a ride. But he didn't move toward me. And I didn't back up. I finally came to my senses and just pulled away and drove on.

So yeah, that woman who spoke to me... she was one of the three people he killed that night before the others managed to finally take him down.

Getting near the end of the road here. That is the Paconic Mall, over that hill, still standing. I never understood how those dead malls are allowed to keep upright and rotting. I pulled over there thinking I was going to grab some lunch, I didn't know it had been dead for about a year by that point. Maybe three cars in the parking lot. But I thought, hey, it's raining, maybe I'll

take a look around, sometimes the food courts in these things are hanging on for dear life, but no. The doors were open and the lights were on, but the A/C was out and everything was shuttered, there was even a little graffiti going on here and there. Very eerie. Middle of a workday, and all you could hear was the rain drumming on the roof and the piped-in music, the music was still really faint overhead. For some reason the music still always seems to be playing in a dead mall.

I walked around a bit looking for a bathroom. I went down this long, not totally clean hallway and found it. Coming out I got turned around, I started walking the wrong way, hit a dead end, and there was a slightly open door there. I passed it at just the right moment and I thought I heard human voices far away, it almost sounded like a bunch of people cheering at a baseball game or something, it was real quick and then it went away.

I stuck my head in the door and there was an unlit stairwell, leading down. I couldn't help but wonder what the basement level of a dead shopping mall looked like, you know? So I went down. The stairs bent twice, it really took me deep. It opened up into a totally dark hallway, I could barely see my hand in front of my face, so I figured, OK, that's enough adventure. But then I heard something again, closer. Some applause, twenty or thirty people lightly applauding, very echoey.

I made my way down the hall, and by the sounds I could just manage to navigate and weave closer. Every door on either side of me was locked. Exposed pipes overhead, junked furniture, sandbags. Then finally I saw an open door, and light was coming through it, and I took it.

I came out almost right away on a huge wraparound railing, came up to my waist. It was one side of an enormous rectangular catwalk basically, almost like above a big theater or a convention center, and over the railing I could look down and see that there was a level below the basement level. That's where the people were.

There were fifty of them, I'd say. All of them just standing around. Some conversations going on, I couldn't make those out, they were too far away. The light from the glass roof came all the way down so they could kind of see what they were doing, but with the rain, you know, it was a little murky.

There were two big contraptions, one on either side of this big flat area down there, and I could figure out what they were almost right away. I just couldn't believe it, that's all. Two guys were climbing up onto each one and they laid down, face up, on a wooden platform just big enough for their bodies. Someone was doing a little tinkering under the mechanism of one of them, he was making some kind of alteration. And a few people in the audience were passing cash to each other, and some guy in Bermuda shorts with a huge belly was making notes on a clipboard as he collected the money and conferred with this person or that person. And then a guy in a black hoodie called something out and raised an arm and everything got quiet, and then he dropped his arm and simultaneously two helpers standing beside each opposing mechanism threw a lever at the exact same moment, very precisely, they had to lean their weight into it, and the arms of the catapults swung and they launched these two men forward, directly at each other at high speed, across the expanse of maybe a hundred feet.

I didn't even have time to look away before they impacted. It wasn't quite a perfect trajectory of course; there were weight differentials and I think the men did what they could to brace

themselves. But the sound alone was sickening. I pulled myself away from the railing just as the gasp and then the cheer came from below.

There was some busy conversation, busy activity. I finally crept back up to the railing and peered over, not wanting to get too close. I didn't want to be seen. Both of the guys were down, surrounded by a handful of spectators. Only one of the guys was moving at all. All I could see was his right foot, it was bending just a little bit, bending back and forth, involuntarily I think. There was a new, small patch of blood in the area between the catapults.

I turned and went back through the door and I made my way out of there. Went through the dark back up to the main level, and I left the mall. And I think to myself: Exactly what was a winning bet?

We're on foot from here. There's no real path, so it might be a little bit rough.

One flashlight for you, one flashlight for me. Now when we get there—it's like half a mile—we may have to pry a couple of boards away to get in, but it shouldn't be too bad.

Somebody told me about this place a long time ago. They're not around anymore. I mean, it's going to look a little bit scary but... the place is what you bring to it. This is the place that you go where all things, no matter how strange or disconnected... the most unfathomable things you've ever heard or read or seen... if you go in there and you completely open your mind, all these things start to connect. They start to make sense no matter how illogical or strange the connections may seem sitting here in this car.

You just have to let symmetrical reality go. And when that happens, the place isn't just some spook house in the woods.

It's a... palace.

Come on.

legalese

MAN (*leaving a phone message*)

Hey Mike, I hope you can hear me over the chatter, I'm in Starbucks here... I got your email, so... I was waiting for yesterday's meeting with Accelerated Adventures to compile my list of

concerns about letting the public into the Mondawmin House so soon.... and I'm sorry to dump on you, but I just kind of want to work through it verbally here before I send it over.

First thing: Just in terms of financial liability, I don't think John's math is right. I can see that a \$2500 admission fee is plausible, but there's going to have to be a cap on daily admission, because we have to display to the actuary group at Martlet Coy that every guest is going to follow the maximum set of safety precautions. So two hundred people a day is just not realistic, especially if you're possibly talking sometime about some kind of mass incident maybe, involving multiple guests. The standard line procedures borrowed from a standard tourist attraction... they don't seem safe at all in the Mondawmin House.

Second, the house is just too far out in the middle of nowhere, so intermediate medical facilities are going to have to be built, probably on one of the empty lots that's been currently designated for parking. Martlet Coy is going to want double the number of medical staff that we have on the spreadsheet; it's just too many miles away from St. Elizabeth's. Depending on what guests see in the house—and remember, there have been seventy-one verified sightings inside since *last May*—you could conceivably get a stampede on your hands, and that would be completely disastrous.

What else... yeah, this thing that Chodra mentioned in her report about how, 'Oh yeah, we can handle the medical and psychological pre-screening of all the guests internally' ... no, back up, that is total fantasy. And not just that, but who has found anyone of any authority, in any document, that using the Frankenwell Identity Test has any validity as a crisis indicator in possible trauma situations? We would need to get an affidavit from a reputable hospital about the efficacy of whatever tests are selected, and we're going to need examples of where they were applied. The other issue is how to keep people from submitting forged screening documents to gain entry. Either we're going to have to go non-digital or have an additional waiver signed the day of the tour, by everyone. And I am still in favor of raising that age floor for touring the house from 25 to 35 based on the report I sent over last week.

Ahhhh... yeah, the route, the route guests would take through the house doesn't allow for fast enough escape routes, and I'm not talking about fire here, obviously. I don't see a way to keep the house's historic integrity *and* build the kind of exits I think Martlet Coy's going to want to see, but I'm not a construction expert.

Also, I see that John struck a deal with Hofstra to use their name and logo for some marketing materials. Now that's great, that's a clever way to take the educational mission tax credit and generate credibility, but someone at the school needs to know that in case of a class action suit, a court could perceive that as secondary condonement and drag them into it.

I do see a possible loophole that could allow us to meet the insurance requirements that I'm expecting. So I'm going to send you a document tomorrow. What it shows is the plan of the first floor of the house, but now I've drawn a red line—it runs from the front entrance out through the back exit in the kitchen and on out into the yard and relative safety, I would assume. It cuts out the dining room and parlor entirely. So this is the guest route I suggest we present to Martlet Coy. It's a good sixty feet shorter than the one that got the green light. And, okay, if we were to insist that guests never stop moving along the red line, that *might* allow us to claim the house is a View-Only Attraction, kind of like a tram or tour boat. The key is constant motion; the guests can't be allowed to stop for any reason, and that's going to bring

the total visit time down to about ninety seconds or so. I would also strongly urge a single-file rule and space the guests out a minimum of ten feet apart, because communication between couples, for example, especially in a state of fear... it's only going to hinder that constant movement. And even so, if the ghost appears, the urge that guests are going to have to stop—that's going to be impossible to overcome. And I know that legally, that wouldn't technically be our problem, but come on. Anyway, before that idea is even presented, I'd have to have Ray research precedents for classifying foot traffic under View-Only.

Overall, I don't know what to tell you, you can expect a fight with Martlet Coy. They are in the dark just as much as we are about pricing liability for tours of a verified haunted house, and keep in mind that the number of sightings of what the experts allege is Robert Mondawmin is actually increasing, so I'm still dying on the hill of it's a terrible time to try to launch these tours. I understand there may never be another location or scenario in our lifetimes when a tour like this might even be conceivable, but as a layman I think it's dangerous, and I think it's dangerous in a way no one fully understands yet.

So off the record, and you know, this is just between you and me, let me tell you something that happened to me a few months ago. I was at a dinner party, and there happened to be in attendance this woman whose husband had died about eight weeks after being inside the Mondawmin House for a couple of hours, he was part of some state inspection group. The details of this have apparently never been made public. Now, this guy never reported any sighting, and when they did the autopsy they made no connection between the visit and his death, which they said was by a heart attack. And he seemed perfectly fine right up until his death. He got up in the middle of dinner and he went up to his room, he said he was feeling sad, which totally baffled his wife, this weird comment. So they found his body a couple of hours later, and there was a notepad in his hand. And he had written the words *Better I go with him now than he comes and takes me*. Now, because he was a musician and he was always writing lyrics by hand, his wife hoped that's what he'd been doing.

But do you see what I'm saying? Seventy-one sightings with just one person having a heart attack inside the house itself, but there's absolutely no data on the long-term effects of a sighting on people who have entered and then left, aside from unreliable anecdotal stories—and those are scary enough, frankly. Now I've seen the videos and I've watched the live streams like everybody else, and I swear that if I had that ghost ten feet in front of me, in real life, with half his face burned away, no way would I be the same person when I left that house. So do me a favor: As this goes forward, please just continue to imagine potentially astronomical monetary damages and yes, even personal liability, and hey, maybe some jail time thrown in if one of these tours just goes absolutely to hell.

All right? I'm on vacation Monday Tuesday Wednesday, back in the office Thursday afternoon, I can talk about this by phone pretty much all day Friday.

Okay? Bye.

hole

My name is Casey Rubens. When people ask me why I got out of directing movies in Hollywood and into directing live movement pieces in Philadelphia, I tell them it's not complicated: Adolfo Pedregal drove me insane. I like to say to my theater students: Use the story of Adolfo and I as an example of the dark side of creativity. The moral is, stay away from everyone at the far ends of the Hollywood spectrum, both the heartless marketing vultures *and* the obsessive creatives willing to die for their art. Only work with people who have at least one foot firmly planted somewhere near the sane middle.

Over the years I had heard all the stories about Adolfo, the warnings of his craziness. A screenwriter friend said to me, "Remember when Daniel Day-Lewis quit acting for a while to become a cobbler? Adolfo is like that, but weirder. When *he* goes, he'll just be homeless—and it *will* be permanent." But when Adolfo called me in the middle of the night from Thailand raving about the script I'd sent him, of course I got excited about the possibilities. Suddenly I had Adolfo Pedregal on board, one of the great modern screen iconoclasts, completely unpredictable with his performances, all of which were fascinating in some way. So, he signed on to play the notorious serial murderer Alexander Pichushkin, the chessboard killer, in a pet project of mine, a surreal drama so experimental it could only get off the ground if a major star bought in. Done. We got greenlit for development and things were looking up. And let me tell you, I needed a success at that point or it was over for me in the film business.

So here's what Adolfo, who had dragged many a director through the ringer of his preparation process, wanted to do: Long before the rest of casting even started, he wanted to rent a small house in the middle of nowhere, just the two of us, plus his wife, who was a sculptor, where we would dig into the character of Alexander Pichushkin and the script for two whole weeks uninterrupted. I agreed; what else was I going to do?

He couldn't pick some spot outside of L.A. though. He told me to meet him at a ranch in west Texas, three hours outside Odessa, near the New Mexico border. Not a *good* ranch, mind you. This one was tiny and defunct, unsold now for two years, and sat on an unpaved road three miles long. The woman who had sold Adolfo the RV he often lived out of recommended it to him.

I got on a plane on January 15th, 2013. I flew to Albuquerque, I drove and drove, I got to the house, Adolfo bear-hugged me, we all got drunk at dinner, and Adolfo ranted about capitalism and the American health care system while his wife, the sculptor, apologized for him again and again. At one point he told me how the year before he had ridden freight cars through New Mexico from Christmas Day till New Year's Eve, and one night he'd woken up next to a dead man. *Was this research for something?* I asked him. *No*, he said, like it was a stupid question. Finally Adolfo just passed out on a sofa. I went to bed.

I heard shouting in the middle of the night. The next thing I knew, Adolfo's wife was getting in her rental car and driving off, four in the morning. This was the beginning of divorce number three for Adolfo, who had just turned forty. It was going to be just him and me for

two weeks.

He didn't come out of his room the next day. When I knocked on the door, he called out that he would be ready, in character, at six, and we would start working. Wasn't coming out till then. Asked me to get him a box of Ritz crackers and apples and beer from town and leave it all outside the door—but he asked me to slice the apples for him first. Two-time Oscar nominee Adolfo Pedregal, ladies and gentlemen!

After my run to Dell City, I spent the day writing emails and walking around the property, surprised at how cold it was. (I've always stupidly associated Texas with unending heat.) The scenery was interesting, I'll say that: We were on almost perfectly flat land that ended very suddenly two miles east at the foot of the Guadalupe Mountains. Nothing but great uninterrupted rectangular parcels of grass and sandy loam all around us. The gravel road twisted past our little ranch and stretched another third of a mile to another one which was smaller and in even worse condition, also no longer commercially viable, seemed like. That was it for human presence in all directions. There was a pickup truck parked outside the other ranch that didn't move all day. I was looking forward to standing out at night and looking up at the stars above this great unspoiled landscape.

My producer sent me an email asking if Adolfo had started babbling about government UFO conspiracies yet, behavior which had apparently made Clare Denis swear she would never work with the man again. I sighed and ate dinner alone at five, two reheated Whoppers from the Dell City Burger King.

At six-fifteen I was sitting in the living room sipping a cognac and listening to the wind whistle over the plain, a brand new sound for me, impressive but a little spooky. I kept the lower floor a little dark, liking the atmosphere. I heard a door open upstairs, and then footsteps on the creaky staircase. Adolfo was coming down, but very slowly.

When he appeared there in the dim light, there had been a transformation. He had cut his hair in an awkward way, and was dressed in old denim jeans, boots, and a faded plaid work shirt. But it was the way he looked at me that was so eerie and startling. Like I was a stranger who had intruded upon his home. His eyes were dead somehow, as if he were used to confronting strangers, and killing one more wouldn't make much difference to him.

I think I muttered something like, *Nice*, but he didn't respond at first, just kept coming his way down the stairs. Then he asked me who I was in a subtle, unforced Russian accent.

Used to these games through dealing with a lot of Method acting freaks, I played along, told him I was a film director interested in telling his story. There followed a full hour of uninterrupted conversation with the murderer of at least forty-nine people, Alexander Pichushkin. The talk was sometimes elliptical, sometimes hostile, always fascinating as Adolfo became the man completely down to the manner of speech and the accent, which he'd been studying intensely with a coach for a month already. It was not a pleasant hour. Several times I was unnerved at his unusual phrasing, which I came to realize later was taken directly from transcripts of interviews Adolfo had read. Adolfo projected the likeness of a man less educated than he was, more cynical, more poisonous in his beliefs. Adolfo responded to every question authentically, having absorbed every detail of Pichushkin's life. It was not mere mimicry; he was also projecting a heightened sense of threat that was going to work wonderfully on the screen.

Finally after one particular long silence, Adolfo broke out of Pichushkin and ended the conversation and he was suddenly just an actor again, a man posing as another, and I laughed and applauded, and let me tell you, there was a strong element of relief that it was over, because I did not like the feeling of being alone in this old house on the dark plain with a hammer killer.

Then we had two hours of discussion about the character—and that would have been a great note on which to end the evening, but Adolfo kept talking, and talking, and he wanted to talk about American history and Russian folklore... and sea monsters... and here came the babbling about his past lives and his belief in the spirit world, and as we drank, we got more combative about it, because I have always thought all of that is utter nonsense. Flash-forward to three in the morning, when both us were drunk and exhausted and he was yelling at me, calling me a hack and a Hollywood leech, and I was calling him a delusional idiot, and I woke at dawn on the sofa while he had gone for a run, still not having slept.

We patched things up over Corn Flakes, and the cycle began: The cycle of the most rewarding creative talks and rehearsals and improvisation sessions of my life followed by the punishment of Adolfo's paranoid rants and verbal abuse when I called him out on a bad script idea. Packaged with all this was his passionate adherence to a laundry list of superstitions instilled in him by a set of, I don't know, Aztec or Mayan religious beliefs I had never even heard of. It took a half hour each morning just to relate his madness to my screenwriter friend via email.

By the end of day three, I was totally depleted. When I suggested to Adolfo that we needed a couple of days of rest away from the script, and each other in general, he waved me away and disappeared into his room, muttering that he had a lot of letters to write anyway. At about midnight, I heard him yelling into the phone at what I am almost sure was his mother, calling her a "viper whore" bent on his destruction.

I couldn't sleep. I was too wound up. So at about three, I crept downstairs into the living room and put on my shoes. Despite the cold I felt like absorbing the plains glory outside, all that fresh air and open space. So I stood on the long termite-chewed front porch, loving the clean silence all around, the absence of artificial light. The moonlight gave the far mountains a kind of ethereal glow.

I could see that other ranch house down the road, a good five hundred yards away. I detected a blot of movement on the property. There was someone working on the patch of land behind the house, to the south. They were clearly digging a hole, all alone, at three in the morning. Someone very small in stature. They dug very slowly—the ground had just been broken; it was likely cold and they just had a standard-sized shovel. I was too far away to hear the blade striking the soil, so it was like watching a silent movie.

Instinctively I moved to my left so that my body was mostly behind one of the columns on the porch. I doubted the digger could see me even if they tried; too many shadows. Their methodical work continued for several minutes without much progress. Finally I got too cold to keep standing there and I went back into the house.

When I woke up the next morning and looked out my bedroom window, which was on the side facing west, away from that other house, I saw that a tent had been pitched beyond the border of the property we'd rented. Adolfo emerged from it while I was making waffles. I heard the screen door open and he walked in, bleary eyed, half-naked, shuffling over to the Keurig machine to get coffee while muttering a quiet good morning.

When I asked him the obvious question, he replied that there was a "strange color" inside this house, that there was a "spiritual infection" here somewhere—he didn't know quite where—within the walls maybe, or outside, near the loafing shed. I didn't even take his bait and press for details. We had a lot of work to do since he had decided to challenge the film's final monologue yet again, first wanting to expand it then contract it, then split it in two to add a scene of Pichushkin as a younger man, and so on.

When I went into town to pick up lunch for us, those were the last free moments when I thought maybe I could actually make it through this experience. After we ate we recorded Adolfo's free associations in character with the camera I'd brought, and he vacillated between being divinely creepy to hostile to completely incoherent, spouting thirty minutes of memories from dreams he thought Pichushkin might have had. When I tried to get him off that tack, he stopped and demanded that I have a better camera and microphone brought in because I needed to be using parts of this rehearsal footage in the final film itself, as it was, in his words, "priceless," and he would never be able to repeat either the words or the feeling behind them. And that's when I thought, Is any of this worth it? What am I trying to make here? Wasn't I happier teaching Shakespeare's history plays to wide-eyed acting students back at Ithaca?

The script was in shambles by nightfall, with Adolfo deciding we were missing elemental truths about what created a man like Alexander Pichushkin. It had become clear we now wanted to make two very different films. I went to bed at eight-thirty with a pounding headache. Adolfo retreated to his tent. He'd had a new flannel-lined L.L. Bean sleeping bag couriered in because FedEx couldn't deliver to the ranch overnight.

You can guess that ridiculously early bedtime caused me to come awake at a weird hour, this time one-thirty. I got up, made myself a cup of coffee, and returned to the front porch. I was starting to like the late-night chill, and especially that quiet that was unlike any alleged quiet back in L.A.

I saw right away that the digger was back at work. Same spot. Same task. I couldn't tell how much bigger the hole was getting, it was just too dark for that kind of detail.

I had an idea then. I very quietly slipped back into the house, retreating with as much stealth as I could muster. I even left the door open a crack rather than shut it, absurdly worried that the wind would somehow float that sound down the road to the digger's ears.

There were all sorts of odd bits of décor and even personal possessions still in cabinets and in closets—remnants of the absentee owner, who had been living in Boston for two years. I remembered there was a pair of binoculars sitting on the mantel in the living room. I grabbed them and went out a side door and crept around the edge of the house so I could peer around it like some icky peeping tom and hopefully not be seen by anyone.

The binoculars were better than functional; they were amazing. My view of the digger at work was shaky, but now filled with detail I'd missed. The most apparent was that the digger was a woman with long hair that dangled in front of her face. The most striking was what she was wearing as she kept plunging the spade into the ground, creating a small but growing pile of dirt beside her. She wore a dark dress, awkwardly tight on her. No coat, but a hat with a very wide brim. And when I just let my eyes relax, not fighting the darkness, becoming very zen, I could discern in very brief moments, because the imagery was so indistinct, that the hat had a veil attached to it.

I watched her work for almost twenty minutes, I think. This was the strangest thing I had ever seen. My headache returned quickly—mostly, I am sure, because of the intense focus needed to see through binoculars, through the dark, and trying to keep my hands steady, and feeling cold and exposed and now a little scared. I guessed from the size of the dirt pile that the hole had become maybe a foot deep through the woman's labors.

Scanning the rest of the property, I saw nothing of note. The pickup truck in the circular driveway was a GMC with plenty of rust around the wheel wells, and dirty windows. I didn't think it had ever moved since Adolfo and I had arrived at the ranch.

If there was no visible attempt to obscure the hole from view come daylight, I thought, I would stop thinking something sinister was going on. The woman must have known her digging could be seen, and she must have known someone was staying nearby; our cars were out in the open and either Adolfo or I had been shuttling down the road at least once a day. But her garb bothered me, a lot. The size of the hole bothered me too. A little over four feet long. Not really long enough to bury what would be the worst-case scenario that had already occurred to me. More like the grave of a pet; that made sense.

She stopped working and disappeared back into her house for such a long stretch that I went back inside myself and tried to get some sleep. *Has to be a pet. Has to be*, I thought.

I got maybe an hour of sleep. I came awake before the first crack of light had even appeared in the sky. The front door was opening downstairs. Adolfo going out for a run, or coming in from another absurd tent session. I got up and went down, in mourning for my once-reliable body clock.

If I had come down even thirty seconds later, Adolfo would have been out the door and I would have missed him, for good. He paused in the doorway, his backpack slung around his shoulders.

He was heading back to Vallejo. He told me that he could not possibly stay, and I should leave right away as well. *There's an evil here somewhere*, he said, with complete conviction. For a second I thought, *Is he doing a character, is he being Pichushkin here?* I asked him through gritted teeth to elaborate. He said he did not know where the evil was hiding, but it was hiding from us and it would destroy us if we stayed in this house.

It's newborn, this thing, he said. *It's powerful*. He thought it might have started at the house down the road, but it was here now. Staying would be an act of madness.

Rather than try to fight his beliefs again, I raised the practical matter of the film, about which

he suddenly seemed totally disinterested. *Too much danger, too much*, he said under his breath. No apology. I embarked upon a level orange meltdown at that point. I screamed at him that I'd had it with his grade-A crazy and that I didn't want him anywhere near my movie, and that Paul Giamatti would be a most suitable replacement.

Adolfo was weirdly calm. No arguments this time. He said, *Get in your car and go if you know what's good for you*, and he closed the front door gently behind him, and he got in his van and drove out of my project and my life. The brief note he'd left me on the kitchen table, which said essentially the same nonsense he told me verbally at the door, was promptly torn by me into sixteen small pieces.

I spent the morning informing various interested parties that Adolfo was off the film. I took a sixty-minute hot shower, then at about noon I went onto the porch and looked down the road at the other house, where the details of the acreage behind it were still remote but now plenty visible in the bright sunlight.

The hole was there, not touched since the night before, plainly out in the open. *OK*, I thought, *one less worry*. From about one o'clock to dinnertime, I essentially rewrote my script, removing about ninety percent of Adolfo's ideas but also about half of my own. It was going to be a relief to my producer that I intended to temper the most experimental scenes, which I saw now were bloated and self-indulgent. I began to feel sane again. I stayed fully sober all day and by nightfall I found life to be a somewhat acceptable proposition again. I went out back and saw that Adolfo had left his tent standing, for me to tear down I suppose. I went out there in bare feet, unzipped the flap and poked my head in, feeling my anger return.

His sleeping bag was in there, and also a few letters he'd received in Vallejo that he'd brought out here to read, I suppose. And a copy of some academic text about life in Russian prisons. There was a pair of boots too.

It struck me as a little strange that he'd left all this here. That kind of rudeness wasn't quite like him. He was a lot of insufferable things, but not rude. It was as if in his alleged fear he had become in a real hurry to leave, panicked or just forgetful, grabbing only his backpack from upstairs before rushing out.

I left everything there and took a nap. The nap somehow stretched deep into the evening, stress-induced I suppose. I woke up past ten, ate some leftover macaroni and cheese that Adolfo had made (which was actually amazing), and watched *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

At twelve-thirty, I went around turning all the lights out in the house. Then I took the binoculars down from the mantelpiece again, and I walked to the front door, and I opened it just a crack, and looked out to the east.

No sign of the digger on the property beyond. A very light rain was falling but it was very warm, springlike really. Something occurred to me. The rain was due to end completely in about an hour. I thought, *Maybe, yeah, maybe she's waiting. Waiting inside the house, looking out the window, waiting for the rain to end.*

I sat in the living room, in the dark, listening to that soft tapping sound on the windows. I

think it was somewhere in that hour or ninety minutes that I first decided to leave the film business entirely. The idea came into my head like the gift of a rose. Eventually the tapping stopped completely. I waited just a little longer, then went to the front door and opened it again, six inches at most.

She must have started sometime during the rain itself, impatient, wanting to be done, because she was out there, in her dress and hat and veil, digging away. I was frustrated by my vantage point and realized that the angle I truly needed to observe properly could only be had by returning to the previous night's spot, standing behind the edge of the house.

I slipped out the side door and moved across the wet grass, and upon settling into my fixed position I leaned around the drain pipe on that south edge of the house, and steadied the binoculars.

It appeared the woman was finally done digging. During my repositioning she had left the shovel beside the hole and disappeared. But she came out of the house very soon.

Now she was holding a large bulging trash bag in each hand, struggling with the weight. She walked up to the hole, and dropped them both gently in. She turned and went back into the house again. A minute passed, enough time to question whether I was about to go off the rails just like Adolfo. The digger came out again with two more bags of slightly smaller volume. Now an oversized purse dangled awkwardly from her forearm.

Into the hole the bags went.

She came around the near side of the house now, slowly. I eased my body backward a few inches but kept the binoculars up, getting very paranoid about being spotted. She was taking something from the purse. I guessed because she was moving toward the pickup truck in the driveway that they were keys, and I was right. She was leaving.

Now well behind her, emerging from the far side of that house, was a man. I found myself bending my knees a bit as if to shrink myself and hide better, as if that would have really mattered. This man ambled very slowly toward the truck as if he was just there to say goodbye as the digger left on whatever mission she could possibly need to execute at this insane hour of the night.

She was a little closer to me now than she had ever been. When she unlocked the driver's side door and opened it, the dome light went on and I saw her hat and veil more clearly. Black, they were, and so was her dress. I caught the slightest glimpse of the side of her face. Then she closed the door again and started the engine.

I shifted my view to the man. He came up just behind the truck and stood in the red glare of the taillights, very close to it, content to just watch the woman go. She pulled away gently enough to make me think she was conscious of the noise she was making on the gravel. She began the process of winding down the drive and guiding the truck onto the unpaved road, in the direction of Dell City. She was obviously in no hurry. She left the man standing in the darkness.

I focused on him even more intently, having ever more difficulty keeping the heavy binoculars steady. My forearms had started to hurt bad. The moment the sound of the truck engine faded

into nothingness, the man turned his body in my direction. And I knew immediately that he was looking right at me.

I jerked back behind the house, cursing myself. wondering if I had misjudged the angle, if I had let myself lean out far enough to give myself away that quickly and easily, or if he had sensed me somehow, or it was just chance that he was looking my way. I crept back along the side of the house to the side door into the kitchen and hustled back inside, closing the door firmly behind me and making sure to lock it.

Instead of heading upstairs, I once again assumed the chair in the living room, leaning forward, tense. I closed my eyes and listened. The world outside the house produced not a sound, not even a breeze, not even the trickle of residual raindrops through the gutters.

At some point I succumbed to the compulsion to go to the big front window. I pushed the curtains aside just an inch.

He was out there, and he was coming to the house. He had left the other property on foot and was now halfway to his destination, a silhouette in the dark, crossing the acres between the two houses. No question where he was headed. He looked so small out there on the landscape, but slowly growing in size as he traversed the wet ground at a slow but steady pace.

I sat again, and waited. Surely it would be no more than a minute before I'd hear his footsteps on the porch. But much more time than that went by, I swear, it may have been four or even five minutes, as if he were intentionally making me wait.

Finally, here it was: that wooden groaning on the steps, all four of them, and then the knocking at the door, softer than I expected. Three measured raps, then silence again.

I will tell you why I answered the door, and maybe you have to know me to really understand. Like many people, I crave narratives in life, in my case narratives to keep my ideas flowing, to wake me up to other experiences. I need to be in new dramas intensely, I need to *feel* things intensely, and sometimes that means opening the doors that should not be opened, do you get it? The allure of even fear? The story addict in my brain opened the door rather than the rational being.

I had not heard the man descend off the porch, but now he was standing several yards away from it in the grass. It felt like he was considering retreating without confrontation.

Raising his voice a little to cover the distance between us, he said his name was Randall, and he hoped his wife hadn't disturbed my sleeping. He wanted to be sure I wasn't worried about anything strange going on. He remained in place as if to assure me he was no threat, spreading his arms slightly in a gesture of consolation. This was a great weight off my mind, so much so that I crossed the porch and descended to the bottom step to speak to him. I told him it was no problem. I had just gotten a little curious, understandably I hoped.

The details of this man's face were murky but he was about forty-five, fifty, with a crewcut, wearing a nylon work vest, very stout boots, jeans. Spoke with a fairly distinctive southern accent. He nodded appeasingly, then tilted his head to look at the sky and commented on how nice a night it was. I agreed.

He fell silent then, and I was about to tell him my name and why I was there in the house, but he looked on the verge of speaking, concentrating very intensely on coming out with the right words.

There's a lot of roaming and hunting things out here, he said. Michy clipped a wolf, night before you got here. Beautiful thing. She drives too fast.

I was having a little trouble hearing him, so I came out onto the grass, still keeping my distance somewhat, and I told him, hesitantly, that was fine.

She takes things like that real hard, he told me. She's been through a lot. More than any human being should suffer. Show me anyone on the street, and if they went through all that, would they even make it? Wouldn't they have the right to break at some point?

I muttered some reply that I hoped sounded supportive. He looked skyward again, locating the moon, seeming in awe of it. He said, *We can all of us break. Why can't all of us forgive? See, that's what I just learned. I just learned this. My education was all at once. I am now someone who... empathizes.*

That's good, I told this man, that's good that you empathize. I turned back to the porch to convey the hint that I had to be getting back in. Now I really was scared of him, of his strange thoughts.

Judge not, unless you be judged, he misquoted. I'm sorry you had to see anything weird, but it's all over now. Michy will get better. I just wanna ask you... to let us be.

I echoed those last three words back to him: *Let you be. Sure.* The man turned and began to depart, sparing me the awkwardness of retreating. He retraced his path back to the ranch house, his boots squelching in the grass.

When he was far enough away not to hear, I exhaled deeply, jaggedly. I kept watching him go, fascinated by his smallness on the landscape. He was well over six feet tall, I thought, but like anyone else would be, dwarfed by the visuals of this place, especially in the dark.

When he got back to his property, he crossed the circular driveway and for some reason just kept going, angling to the north. He reached the edge of the drive and started to follow the road out toward the horizon, in the direction Michy had driven.

I walked forward myself just to keep him in sight, wondering where he could possibly be going. There was nothing but plain out that way for miles. His pace perfectly steady, his head held neither low nor high, he walked into the distance.

I got ever closer to his home, baffled. He became a dot of no significance under that vast sky dotted with stars. That sky was the sort of blue you hope is there for you at the closing moments of your life: secretive and mysterious but warm, enveloping, infinite.

Finally Randall got too far away on the road for me to see him anymore. By then I was at his house, standing where the pickup truck had been twenty minutes before. The house was so simple, so modest. It looked like basic upkeep had fallen aside for many years. A wooden sign on the front door said Welcome with a floral pattern painted around the word.

I went around to the rear of the property. A lot of garden tools lay propped or tucked against the back of the house. The rear screen door from which Michy had emerged had tears in the mesh.

To the hole I went. I had guessed right about its length. About four feet. I crouched beside the small pile of dirt she had excavated. Then I reached forward to touch the closest garbage bag, puffed out and filled to about half capacity. A thick twist tie kept its contents sealed away.

I pushed my index finger against the bag more and more firmly. Whatever was inside felt mostly soft, softer than even rags, and there was a fair bit of liquid too, thick liquid. My finger explored and in a moment it pressed against something firm and angular. Through the side of the bag I gripped it with my full hand, attempting to trace it, to give it more identity.

I drew my hand back quickly when my peripheral vision picked up a hint of light in the distance. I stood up and looked north. Headlights. Whether it was Michy returning already, I couldn't tell. I took one last look at the hole, and at the shovel she had laid beside it, and I turned and started to run back to the rental house. And I did not look back, even when I reached the porch and the back door. The sound of the engine drew closer, but then to my relief the walls of the house blocked off all sound.

Upstairs, I packed my bags in about three minutes. I came very close to forgetting my laptop. Anything that could be left behind I left behind. That's why God invented the security deposit. Cracking the front door ajar one last time, I saw that yes, the pickup truck was back, parked in a slightly different spot. But there was no sign of Michy.

I wasted no time getting into my rental car, starting the engine, and steering toward the gravel road. Once there, I took the turn that would lead me to Highway 62 and Route 54 and eventually, the airfield, where yes, I would have to wait many hours for a flight, but I wanted out of the area now. Not until I rolled past Randall and Michy's house at thirty miles an hour did I start to feel at ease. I was not proud of myself for playing dumb, getting out of there before I found out anything else.

I switched on the high beams. Tiny rocks made insistent popping noises on the underside of the car. I very consciously hugged the center of the bumpy road, giving anyone who might be out walking plenty of room on the right. At about the two mile mark, still about five minutes shy of the turnoff to Highway 62, I thought, *OK, she must have picked him up on her way back.* There was nowhere for him to go, no other houses until Pine Springs, and no roads cutting across this one that he could have reached in so short a time.

But then, there he was. The headlights splashed across the back of his work vest as he walked north on that shoulder. Prepared to walk all night, seemed like. I accelerated past him and did not turn my head to see his face.

Soon the turn to 62 came up, I took it, and I never saw the Guadalupe Mountains again. My movie about Alexander Pichushkin never did get made. About that I have no regrets because its best scene lives on, replayed in my mind a lot even when I try to block it out: the one of Adolfo descending that dark staircase fully in character and looking at me with dead eyes that didn't even seem to be his own.

My story ends eight years later. I had flown into L.A. after a long, long time away to deal with some old music rights issue on the DVD of my first film. I reluctantly dropped in on a party in Silver Lake at the behest of my old screenwriter friend. Someone there mentioned the latest cringey gossip about Adolfo Pedregal, who hadn't acted or really even been seen in quite a while, not since he'd quit the business after a meltdown on some podcast and gone to live in Cartagena, where he was either driving trucks or living with some fitness cult, no one was sure which. There had just been a weird incident in Texas with him; he had mysteriously and only briefly emerged there.

What was that place you two went to? my screenwriter friend asked as someone recounted the details. *Wasn't that called Dell City?* I asked our host to reach beside him to turn the loud music in the room down just a bit so I could hear better, pressing for details.

Adolfo, claiming to his fourth wife that he had been suddenly seized by a series of vivid dreams, had flown seven hours from Colombia to Texas, driven six more to an isolated ranch house near the mountains, and actually begun to dig on the property while the woman inside the house was asleep. He had pulled his cell phone out and called the police as soon as he wrenched a garbage bag out of the dirt and cut it open with his hunting knife.

I made the costume designer who was telling the story slow down. Apparently the woman who was living in the house had immediately confessed to killing somebody years before, chopping him up and burying him there, and then interring the hand that bore his wedding ring under some mound a mile away. And Adolfo had remembered feeling something weird about the place way back then and suddenly now his dreams had told him exactly what it was. Just a typical tale of Adolfo lunacy, except this was apparently real.

What was the name of the victim? I asked, *have they published it?* My friend, stunned into silence, was searching the story on his phone. He scrolled and scrolled. Some people waited silently, others turned to different conversations.

Randall R. Hooper, my friend said. Husband.

The story described how he'd been arrested twice in the past for abusing her. Terrible long-term abuse situation. There was a photo of him there online. And that tiny digital image was help up for me to see.

There is a postscript to this story I feel it's only fair to add. When Adolfo Pedregal's biographer called me for anecdotes about him a year after he died in a hiking accident, she told me what she thought all that letter-writing he did was about back in the day. *Left a few back in that tent even,* I told her, *yeah, what was the deal with that?* Turned out Adolfo had been supporting hundreds upon hundreds of needy children through those ads on TV—you know, for 68 cents a day, you can make a difference, that kind of thing. Probably the most inefficient charitable donations someone in his situation could have made, but he was terrible with money, and apparently, he liked to hear from the kids, and send letters back to them. Another piece in the complicated puzzle of this great actor.

Rest in peace, Adolfo. I'm kind of glad I knew you.

And oh God, I should have listened.

blueberries

Quincy and Jen-Beth were the happiest of couples, and one day they decided to go for a Sunday drive in the country. They had lunch at a cozy restaurant, bought apples at a farm stand, and drank iced tea as Quincy drove through the sunshiny landscape.

On Rural Route 488, Jen-Beth spotted a small hand-lettered sign on the shoulder that seemed to sum up the very essence of summertime in the countryside. It said, simply, in purple paint: BLUEBERRIES – 4 MILES. She pointed it out to Quincy, who nodded and made a mental note of it.

Two miles later, Jen-Beth saw a second sign in the same handwriting. A single rusty nail held it affixed to a wooden pole. It said, as expected, BLUEBERRIES – 2 MILES.

"You're staying aware of this, right?" Jen-Beth said, touching Quincy's arm slightly.

"Don't worry, I'm on top of it," he said.

The couple drove on. It truly was a lovely afternoon.

When the third sign on the side of the road appeared over a gentle crest, informing them that the blueberries were only a thousand feet on the right, Jen-Beth tugged at Quincy's shirt sleeve.

"Honey," she said, "Honey. Come on, let's turn around."

"I'm sure these are old signs," he replied. "You can barely read the lettering, and look at the age on that wood."

"But how do you *know*?" Jen-Beth asked.

"We'll be *fine*," he assured her.

But Jen-Beth became squirmy. Just before the car embarked on a long blind curve, she begged him to stop the car. She had a terrible feeling.

"The blueberries, Quincy!" she cried. "The blueberries!"

"If they *are* there, we'll just accelerate right past them!" he insisted.

And then, ahead, on the right, there they were, to Jen-Beth's horror: the blueberries. And unfortunately, they were smarter than Quincy. They had dragged a chain of spikes across the road, and when Quincy rolled over it, all four tires blew within seconds. The car spun out and came to rest in the middle of the road... and the big blue blueberries came for them.

Jen-Beth and Quincy both screamed as the bulbous orbs surrounded the car and began to beat on the hood, the roof, the windshield and all the windows relentlessly, trapping them inside.

"We're gonna die!" Quincy cried, and pounded on the horn in a sad act of futility.

The blueberries brought out the crowbars and newly sharpened axes quickly. The window glass smashed in on Jen-Beth and Quincy from both sides. The passenger's side door opened and Jen-Beth was dragged out onto the hot pavement. Quincy tried to escape through the hole in the shattered windshield, but only succeeded in cutting himself in two dozen places. As sweat dripped from their stems and slid down their purplish skin, the blueberries hauled him out... and then their real orgy of violence began.

The blueberries murdered the couple in broad daylight, painting Rural Route 488 with an opulent, rancid stew of blood, innards, and broken bones, leaving the remains of Quincy and Jen-Beth for the buzzards. Then they escaped back into hiding, leaving tons of physical evidence of their deed... but they were big round juicy blueberries and couldn't care less. Even the police agreed there were some things *so* scary, they could do whatever they wanted. And so, terror continued to rule the summer countryside, because life... is *hard*.

Late Checkout

We hear late-night AM radio static, odd opening theme music, and then the quiet voice of a show host.

Good evening. You have returned to the Council of Masks. Tonight's story is based on a real incident... or so I think. More and more now I become confused in my research, and if I don't excavate the entire truth quickly enough, I begin to conflate it with strange tatters from my imagination.

I have finally realized why I do this. It is intentional. It represents a primal yearning for childhood and its priceless corruptions of realities into mysteries.

I remember when I was seven years old, my parents took me on a trip in wintertime to see a faraway dying relative. We had to stop overnight in a small town where they'd never been because

of some sudden issue with the car. We were very poor; we had to stay in the least expensive place my parents could find, and this was an old stone house where two nuns rented us a room.

One night became two. Some car part had to be waited for. As I went out into the street to play in the morning, one of the nuns knelt down and said to me, *This town is full of the very old. When you play, you mustn't make a sound.* She put a finger to her lips: *Shhhh.*

I didn't know what to do, so I just walked the roads. Small silent houses, overgrown lawns. Silence. No one seemed to own a car, I saw almost none. No playground or school. Eventually I gave up on finding anyone or anything, and went back to the place where we had found ourselves.

A second night came and I said to my mother, *When can we leave?* And she said, *Just as soon as the part comes.*

I remember looking out the window on the road on that last day, and someone had finally appeared. A man, a man with a very stained white apron over his clothes. He was holding a pair of cymbals in his hands. He stood in the road and he cried, *I can take no more! How do you like this, you sleepers?* And he began clanging the cymbals together, shattering that oppressive silence. Two men came from somewhere I didn't see, and they were each wearing a suit as if they'd come from a funeral, and they knocked the cymbals out of the offender's hands and they began to pull him away, dragging him, they were dragging him toward the woods on the far side of the road as he struggled against them, screaming, and they pulled him into the trees... and I turned away from the window.

We left just an hour later. My parents looked all around us as we drove at walking speed out of this town whose name I never knew. And we never spoke of that place.

What a wonderful thing that was as I grew old, not trusting or understanding what I had seen, misinterpreting it in so many different ways as the years went on. My mother and father no longer live, and the town belongs only to me now. It might be keeping its truth hidden still, somewhere inside one of those houses. But I *will not go.*

The static fades out.

We hear a car pull up to a curb on a quiet street.

ALFIE (homeowner, about fifty, from the front porch)

Hi! You can park right next to the — no — okay...

The driver's door opens, and at the same time, we hear a screen door open nearby and footsteps on a porch.

Sadie is heard mounting the porch steps. She comes off as brusque, terse, and sullen; Alfie sounds weak and needy.

ALFIE

I'm Alfie. Come on in, welcome!

SADIE

I'm Sadie.

Alfie re-opens the screen door and their footsteps and voices move from outside to in. They settle in the living room.

ALFIE

Sadie, that's a real different name. Sadie Joffe!

SADIE

Yeah.

ALFIE

Well... this is the living room, you're free to use it while you're here, the key works for the main house too. There's some coffee and things over there...

SADIE

Oh, good, I could really use some coffee. Got a headache from all the headlights in the dark.

ALFIE

How was your drive?

SADIE *(crossing the living room)*

Um... you know, everyone out there is an idiot.

ALFIE

Sorry, I don't know how to use that machine, I just bought it for the guests and you're the first one...

SADIE *(operating it)*

That's all right, I'm a veteran of these things. We just open *this*.... yeah, I was a little worried that there were no reviews yet, but I guess someone has to be the first.

ALFIE

I'm a little nervous about it all, there's a lot to learn.

SADIE

Looks like you could use a little help with the listing, there's some vagueness on there. Some spelling mistakes.

ALFIE

Oh I know, I could never spell. So what are you doing in Goose Creek?

SADIE *(irritated by the questions)*

Ah... I have a job interview on Monday down the road, so I just needed a place for tonight, tomorrow, to sort some things out before.

ALFIE

Oh wow. Sounds like an important job.

SADIE (*opening cabinets*)

Creamer, plain creamer.... do you not have plain creamer?

ALFIE

Oh... I don't think...

SADIE

Just French vanilla?

ALFIE

Yes, sorry, I'll try to get some normal.

SADIE

A lot of people like unflavored.

ALFIE

So what will you be doing, for this job?

SADIE

I'm a.... it's in Finance. With Rarity Computing. Big... big tech company.

ALFIE

Oh, wow. I didn't know such a big company was in Goose Creek.

SADIE

They're not, they're in Charleston. You really never heard of Rarity?

ALFIE

No...

SADIE

You know what, I'm stressed out, I'll probably just turn in. Is that the key there?

ALFIE

Yeah. Here you go. I stocked everything as much as I could, but it's just me, there's no one else, and I have a terrible memory, all my life, I'm sorry... so if there's anything missing, you can just come in here and take anything you need from the bathroom or the kitchen if I'm not here.

SADIE

Okay. Where's the cottage?

ALFIE

Right behind... this way, see through the window? There's a shed and then there's the cottage.

SADIE

Thanks. Goodnight.

ALFIE
Goodnight.

The door closes loudly behind Sadie.

The next day. The screen door opens again and Sadie enters the living room.

SADIE
Morning.

ALFIE *(turning off the TV)*
Good morning! How'd you sleep?

SADIE
Fine. I just wanna get some coffee here...

ALFIE
Cottage OK?

SADIE
You could use a dehumidifier, the heat's real dry in there.

ALFIE
Oh, OK, I'll make a note of that and get one soon.

SADIE
Like, *real* dry. Can I fill this with water from the sink here?

ALFIE
Sure.

SADIE *(running the faucet)*
Is there no cable or streaming for that TV, it looks like I'd have to sign in for everything.

ALFIE
No, sorry. It's just me and I don't watch much TV. The wireless works, right?

SADIE *(re-entering the living room and operating the coffeemaker)*
It's a little slow.

ALFIE
I just watch a lot of British shows, I like *Fawlty Towers* and *Doctor Who* and *Blackadder*, do you know those?

SADIE
Doctor Who I think I heard of.

ALFIE

I have a crazy sense of humor! You could probably tell that from the WiFi password. In Pittsburgh they used to call me Clown Boy.

SADIE

Yeah, that's a funny sign you have below the TV in the cottage.

ALFIE

Which one?

SADIE

The one that says "Checkout time: 6 a.m."

ALFIE

Oh yeah, I like to have the rules posted pretty clear.

SADIE (*just killing time while the coffee brews*)

Pittsburgh, huh?

ALFIE

I moved equipment and stuff for a rock band there. Two bands. *Three* rock bands!

SADIE

Nice.

ALFIE

I was a hippie for years. 1997 to 2005. I almost lived in a van, the whole works.

SADIE

I think I'd go crazy, people like that.

ALFIE

I met so many amazing people. I once got high with the road crew from that band Night Ranger. That was the one and only time, though. I never did it again. I never felt so sick. I went to the hospital. That was when I made up my mind: "Rules are important. Rules are important."

SADIE

So are they the people in the pictures, around the cottage, in the, ah...?

ALFIE

Yes, that's the band people I used to... but a lot of those are of my daughter.

SADIE

It felt a little strange, to have so many personal photos around, you might want to think about moving those out.

ALFIE

Strange?

SADIE

Yeah, a little too personal.

ALFIE

Oh.

SADIE

Your daughter, she's not the one with the... holding a guitar a lot?

ALFIE

Yeah, that's her!

SADIE

Huh. That's your daughter? Is she graduating college in one?

ALFIE

Anne Arundel Community College, 2013, yes!

SADIE

Hmm. You must have been real young when you had her.

ALFIE

Oh, well... the thing is, when I say "my daughter," it's just that we got so close over the years. She's actually not technically mine. She was a runaway and she stayed with me when she was having a bad time, a long time ago, and I helped her and we were never really apart, and I helped her with high school and she lived with me on and off. She called me Dad and everything. She didn't have anyone else.

SADIE

Right.

ALFIE

She died two years ago.

SADIE

Mmm.

ALFIE

Yeah. Two years ago.

SADIE

What happened?

ALFIE

A... car accident.

SADIE

Wow.

ALFIE

But I'll do what you said, I'll move the pictures out of there for the next guest. There's someone coming in right after you, and two weeks from now too. I guess I'm a hit!

SADIE

You should get those spelling mistakes fixed before you do anything else, a lot of people will just go right past the listing if they think you're not on the ball. If you're not perfect, you're just dirt to them.

ALFIE

Oh, I already made of note of it, gonna get those ironed out, I know someone who's a whiz at that.

SADIE (*opening the screen door*)

I'll check with you tomorrow morning on my way out.

ALFIE

Six a.m., remember.

SADIE (*laughing cynically*)

Right, got it. "Six a.m."

The door closes again.

That night. The screen door opens slowly. We hear rain outside, and then a lamp being turned on after a cat meows.

SADIE (*startled, backing up into a desk*)

Oh Jesus, I didn't see you there!

ALFIE (*softly*)

It's OK... I just like to come down here sometimes when it's like, and have my tea.

SADIE

I was just looking for another blanket, the heat's so dry I don't even really want to turn it on.

ALFIE

Oh sure... there's two extras folded right over there on the ottoman.

SADIE (*crossing the room*)

This'll do. (*pause*) Just sitting there in the dark?

ALFIE

Just for a while.

SADIE

It's really late.

ALFIE

Well, I had such a crazy dream. I'll tell it to you. It was so silly. I killed Woody Guthrie. You know him?

SADIE

Heard the name maybe.

ALFIE (*becoming weirdly contemplative*)

He was my hero. He traveled *everywhere*. And I killed him. On a beach. But I had to get rid of the body somehow, so I was running around the house trying to figure out what to do. And the next thing I knew, I was standing over the sink and I was trying to push his arm down into the hole there... just the half with the hand, not the whole thing, not the elbow... but it wouldn't go, so I tried... (*he giggles in an odd, childlike way*)... oh, this is so terrible, I tried *twisting* it into the hole like it was a screw, and it was just... sticking up because it wouldn't twist in any further. I was all out of ideas. Have you ever heard such a stupid dream?

SADIE

They get weird sometimes. 'Night.

ALFIE

Did you ever have one so bad you started screaming?

SADIE

What? No.

ALFIE

You can just leave the key on the bedspread when you go in the morning. That's better than tramping across the lawn in the dark and the rain, it's supposed to keep raining.

SADIE

Well, it won't be dark.

ALFIE

Sunrise at 7:12, I checked it. I like to check it every day and see how we're slowly getting toward spring.

SADIE

I figure I'll head out at about 10:30.

ALFIE

Don't forget the checkout time, though.

SADIE

The... checkout time. It's usually 11 or so.

ALFIE

Right, but remember the sign? Here it's six.

Pause.

SADIE

You *are* joking, right? "Clown Boy," I get it.

ALFIE

Oh no. See, I need to get in there and start working for the next guest. I'm kind of slow.

SADIE

That's... that's really not an acceptable checkout time. It *is* dark at six, but that doesn't even *matter*; you can't ask people to leave their room at six in the morning. That certainly wasn't on the web site, thank God, you'd never get a booking.

ALFIE

It's important though. I need to be able to take my time with my bursitis. And I'm such an early riser, I figure I may as well take advantage of that.

SADIE

Look... my interview isn't till noon. I need to get some really good sleep, and there is no way in hell that a checkout time before even *nine* is acceptable. You'll just have to wait.

ALFIE

Well, I can't have you just pay for the extra day. There's another guest coming. Tomorrow night.

SADIE

I wouldn't pay for an extra day *anyway*. I'll leave the room at a normal... human... time. Six o'clock in the *morning*? That's not a sane reality, you know that, right?

ALFIE

I get to make the rules for my own place.

SADIE

Sane rules. *Sane!* Six a.m.? You want to go out of business immediately?

ALFIE

No.

SADIE

Well, there is a functioning world out there that operates on a standard clock. There is no hotel, no *motel*, no Airbnb in America that hustles people out *before dawn*.

Pause.

SADIE

I am under... listen to me, you don't *know* the stress. You can't *imagine* it. So I'll leave at ten, you can have a nice five-star review, get you going, but I have to go to sleep, I can't *argue* this with you. All right?

ALFIE

One thing I've learned is, a rule is a rule. It's right there on the wall, beneath the TV.

SADIE

That doesn't mean *anything* to me. Look at *every other listing*. Leave this house sometime, communicate with the world, get *real* about this!

ALFIE

I never want to leave this house again. Why should I?

SADIE

Stay here then! Be a weakling.

ALFIE

You're just like that man.

SADIE

What man?

ALFIE

The man who hit Daisy with his car.

SADIE

Sorry...?

ALFIE (*starting to cry*)

She had pulled over, just like she was supposed to... she was getting along with the police... she was doing that breathalyzer... and the man came along too fast and he didn't move over into the other lane like the law says you have to when there's a police car on the shoulder. And he... killed her. Because he thought he was above it.

SADIE

That's not a *law*, it's just something you're supposed to—

ALFIE

It's the *rule!* It's the *rule*, and he broke it, and Daisy *died*, and you're no better! *Follow the rules!*

Long silence, just the sound of the rain.

SADIE

I am going to *sleep* now. I'll be out of your little universe tomorrow. Good luck with the business. Get a humidifier.

She opens the door and leaves.

Alfie sighs deeply and sips his tea loudly, as he's been doing all along. Then he begins to sing to himself, a Woody Guthrie song.

'Now as I look around, it's mighty plain to see
This world is such a great and a funny place to be;
Oh, the gamblin' man is rich an' the workin' man is poor...
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.'

Same night. The rain is louder. We hear a number being dialed, three rings, and then an automated voice.

VOICE ON MESSAGE

You have reached the voice mailbox system for Spartanburg Human Services. Your contact, Allison Donovan, is not currently available. Please leave a message and your call will be returned as soon as possible. Thank you.

After the beep, Sadie begins to speak, low and threatening.

SADIE

Guess who this is... and guess where I am.

Pause.

I know you tried to tell Rarity about my record. Screw up my last chance. Even after I told you what will happen to me if I don't get this.

So listen to me... *pig*. If this job doesn't come through... I'm coming to your house, and I'm going to torture you.

Pause.

I'm going to tie you up... and torture you.

She hangs up.

Morning. The rain has stopped.

There is a persistent, annoying knocking from outside a door. We hear a shifting—Sadie in her bed—and then after a moment, the knocks come again.

SADIE (*scrambling out of the bed and crossing the room, enraged*)

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no...!

ALFIE (*outside, behind the door*)

Sadie?

SADIE (*not opening the door; they talk to each other on opposite sides of it*)

What are you *doing*, I need to *sleep*!

ALFIE (*softly*)
It's ten after six.

SADIE
You need to leave me alone. I'll trade you a lousy three hours of sleep for a review that *won't* put you out of business, how's that for a deal?

ALFIE
You're not going to do what I asked?

SADIE
Does it sound like it?!

ALFIE
I'll have to charge you for the day. I guess in a couple of hours... I'll consider you a trespasser.

SADIE
Are you out of your *mind*?

Long pause.

ALFIE
I should tell you something. I'm really very strong. Did you notice my muscle? I've worked in gardens all my life.

SADIE
Oh, you picked the *wrong person*, little man.

ALFIE
I mean, I could come in there without even needing a key. I don't want to do that, but... I just can't be around people who break the rules. They can't be on my property. I'll break the door if I have to.

SADIE
Come on in, little man. Let's see how far you get.

ALFIE
They shouldn't keep living, people like that. That's my new rule too.

SADIE
If this door opens, you *die*.

ALFIE
How about if I count down, is that fair? I'll start at ten.

Ten... nine... eight...

Seven... six... five...

SADIE *(to herself more than to him)*
You're the one I've been waiting for, pig.

ALFIE
Four... three... two...

One....

Silence. Then there's the sound out there of something heavy being lifted... and then a slamming against the door, as of a large sharp object hitting it. Another strike... then another, vicious and urgent. Then another.

Sadie has begun to laugh crazily, mocking him. The strikes keep coming, and with each one, her laughs become more maniacal.)

There is finally a silence outside... and then instead of another axe strike, a window shatters inward, spraying glass all over.

Later. We hear clumsy movement, indoors, and someone exerting themselves. It sounds like someone is trying to repeatedly jam an object where it doesn't want to go. The sound is vaguely squishy and wet.

SADIE *(with gritted teeth)*
Come on. Come on! Get in there! Get in there!! Get *IN THERE!!*

We hear the garbage disposal beginning to run, encountering a great deal of resistance. Radio static fades in again.

bots

From *The Olympian Online*, December 11, 2014:

Neville Bell, owner of New Harvest Nursery on Kaiser Road Northwest, reported the theft of a farm implement from the nursery's property on Wednesday night. The alleged male perpetrator appeared to have a large buck knife protruding from his waistband when he emerged from a shed. Bell made a statement that the perpetrator "only took a hoe, and he threw the knife on the ground

like he didn't want it anymore. I don't care about the hoe, but he was a scary person. He looked crazy and he walked so slow and weird I was afraid to do any kind of confronting." He said the man walked off into the woods and by the time police came, they were unable to locate him.

My name is Joel Spanhower. I met Samantha in 2013 at a screening of *Come and See*, the brutal anti-war film by Elem Klimov. It was the kind of screening only diehard cinephiles attend: folding chairs in the basement of a museum. I decided to try on this intriguing stranger my famous move of sidling up creepily after the credits and just sort of lurking silently nearby as she drew coffee from an urn into a Styrofoam cup. She offered me a weak smile and I attempted what was for me a recklessly bold conversational gambit, saying "That ending, huh?" She had already rebundled against the cold outside and was almost drowning in a huge green scarf with orange snowmen all over it. She was pretty, but what I think I liked about her was that her short blonde hair was cut and styled so awkwardly and indifferently; I thought maybe here was someone like me, to whom fashion was a mystery never to be solved, so we'd both long since given up. After fifteen minutes of nervousness and stumbling over my words, I worked up the nerve to suggest we dissolve to the coffee shop across the street, having gotten involved in discussing Rainer Fassbinder.

It never even occurred to her to take off her coat and scarf while we sat there for an hour. It wasn't that she was chilly and it wasn't a defensive gesture—it just never occurred to her. Anyway, this for me was whirlwind-level courtship, and I was a little mortified when she asked if I wanted to pop upstairs to look at her DVD collection; turned out she lived in one of the dim little apartments right above the coffee shop.

But I needn't have worried that Samantha Cash was going to try seductive moves that I wasn't remotely prepared for. Like me, she had no real education in that area. It was only because she was so without guile or presumption, and so unwisely trusting, that she asked me up—and yes, all she wanted was to share her taste in movies with a fellow film nut. When I saw stuff like *Withnail and I* and *Melancholia* on her shelf, I suspected the trajectory of my life might change forever.

But I didn't really know how to go about wooing this woman. I was twenty-eight, and like her, a veteran of exactly one romantic relationship. She had been so disappointed and confused in hers, I think she'd slowly lost the belief that anyone would ever again find her alluring enough to pursue. As for me, I was just plain confused about what women wanted, never had a dime to my name, and had simply found it safer to retreat into the world of theater, movies, and books.

Fifteen is the number of drafts I guess I composed of an email to her the next day suggesting we get together the next weekend at—get this smooth move—a coffee shop two doors down from the one we'd just been to. During the day, not even for a meal, just another overpriced latte. She showed up in a distressed university sweatshirt, thrift store sneakers, and her spare pair of eyeglasses, taped on one side with a cut-down Spiderman Band-Aid. By vanity, this woman was not possessed. This time, we talked for three hours.

Oh God, that goofy, hiccuppy, baby platypus laugh of hers whenever she was seized by something funny in mid-sip or mid-bite... when I first heard it, I was tempted to both propose marriage and assure the people sitting nearby they need not run for the exits. When we recognized in each other that we found dumb humor a great defense against the horrors of the world, that erased any lingering conversational awkwardness. It's a wonderful moment between a budding couple when they're freed to share the things they hate and mock them together. I actually felt good telling Samantha tales of my current stupid job with a corporate caterer. She had completely outclassed

me in the income department. She was something called a data archivist for a bougie I.T. firm in Olympia, and had fascinating stories to share about their rather scary work in artificial intelligence, trying to build chatbots with rudimentary understanding of human morality. I tried to intrigue *her* with my half-assed adventures writing and acting in universally ignored plays for a local black box theater group called The Angry Snowmen.

By date number three, in the first week of April, it became obvious that our views of the world and its societies were mutually so dour, we had to confront it. Between the depressing movies we loved and our belief that humankind was doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over, just with nicer iPhones every year, we were an appallingly pessimistic pair. I made a lighthearted joke over hot cider beside a fire barrel about how we were probably bad for each other. To my surprise and discomfort, she didn't take that as a joke. She said when it came to mistrusting the world, maybe there was safety in numbers. It was then that I knew somehow she really was hoping we were going somewhere together.

I invited her to the final performance of my group's latest wobbly show; she came; she laughed supportively while the four other attendees in the house did not; and she didn't look too uncomfortable when the plot took kind of a ridiculous turn that everyone in the group except the author, who delivered pizzas for a living and was high all the time, was embarrassed by. Our first kiss was that night, on the A7 bus across Olympia.

Our beginning was not a love story to be captured in oils by the impressionists; there were no sonnets left at each other's doors or even heart emojis in various colors when we texted. No one will ever write a three-act play about the courtship of Joel and Samantha, two prematurely tired millennials whose idea of a big Friday night was to rearrange our Netflix queues. We were just two people who had found each other in the static, but saw actual romance as a clunky proposition best left to fictional characters. It was nice and unspectacular and easy, and I don't think either one of us had the emotional energy to look around for anything more.

Then there's that point in a relationship, month three or four maybe, where you learn what each other's fears are— not the deepest ones, not yet, but the ones that itch just a little every day in the recesses of consciousness. I was genuinely afraid back then of nuclear war, that some rogue state or terrorist group was going to make the unthinkable happen real soon. Samantha's fears were a little bit more layered. She asked me if I'd ever heard of Moore's Law. That's the supposition that the power of computer processes will double every two years forever, an unstoppable geometric progression. In her five years working at Cap Cobra Innovations, she'd become afraid that things were moving way too fast for humans to ever be able to control that progress again.

What specifically are you afraid of? I asked her once as we lay in the park on, fittingly, a *Logan's Run* beach blanket my mother bought me when I was eleven, God rest her soul. Sam had trouble putting it into words. It was maybe just people soon getting to a point where they could not accept any flaw or inconvenience or even pause in the tech-assisted hum and flow of their lives. *And I think*, she said, *it's going to be a rough world for people who can't perform as well as the machines.*

And now, let me try to describe the funny thing that happened to us without making us seem insane.

Yes, a lot of couples adopt little idiosyncrasies in their communication, the most irritating being the pet names of course: the Schmoopies, the Hon Buns, or maybe they write dorky inspiring messages to each other on a chalkboard they bought on the bottom floor of Ikea, HAVE A SUPER MEETING, CHAMP, YOU GOT THIS!, stuff like that. One day Sam and I were checking out at a used bookstore and the credit card swiper wasn't working for her, and for my benefit I suppose, she threw a weird robot voice at it. She said SAM DISPLEASED WITH SWIPER APPARATUS, and I said SWIPER

FUNCTIONAL, SAM MACHINE FAULTY, RECOMMEND DESTRUCTION, and the cashier looked at us like we were Mickey and Mallory from *Natural Born Killers*. Later at Subway, Sam criticized my condiment choices with the comment JOEL REVULSION LEVEL RISING, CONDIMENT SOFTWARE UPDATE REQUIRED, to which I responded GIRLFRIEND TERMINATION PROTOCOL SET TO ACTIVATE IN T-MINUS THIRTY SECONDS. For whatever reason, we found the robot voices to be just the thing for what ailed us, and they continued in odd moments for weeks, increasing in frequency and complexity when no one was around to hear—and sometimes when they were; thank God we had so few friends. In my mind, the voices always had a tinny echo attached to them, like DISPLEASURE WITH CURRENT MOVIE SELECTION CAUSING INTERNAL COMPONENT EROSION or SAMANTHA BOT TARDY, APOLOGY SEQUENCE REQUIRED TO CONTINUE.

Anyway, cut to the summer of 2013 when we were habitually greeting each other in the robot voices and generally busting them out so often, it wasn't even a conscious joke anymore. *How did we get to this low point?* I asked Sam once on the sofa when we had robotted our way through a criticism of *Jaws 3* that left us giggling like idiots. We pinkie-swore then and there that before we became something unrecognizable to ourselves and others, we must once and for all end the private joke that had given us more pleasure than anything in our lives since the late nineties.

The ban lasted about three days, when a cut to Sam's finger upon slicing a lemon resulted in a horrifying flow of blood onto the countertop. She held this alarming injury up to me and said VITAL SIGNS DROPPING RAPIDLY, RECOMMEND PREPARATION OF REPLACEMENT SAMMIE and I immediately said REPLACEMENT UNAFFORDABLE, THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE. So even imminent loss of consciousness wasn't as important as the joke, and we realized we were deeply ill.

As I speak these words years later, and after musing again on the words of the psychiatrist Sam would see after the incident which changed everything between us, I have my own uneducated theory about the subconscious origins of her robot voice. Intimidated as she had become daily by the ominous future of technology, those goofy verbalizations straight out of cheesy 1950's sci-fi probably seemed like a comfortable throwback. Seventy years ago the concept of silvery machines becoming sentient and all-powerful was about as terrifying as the Blob or Godzilla, something harmlessly far-fetched and abstract. It felt nice to embody creaky robots whose rebellion could probably be struck down by withholding a little WD-40, as opposed to the HAL 9000. And if we wanted to throw a little rusty foot-shuffling and jerky arm gyrations into the mix when we dropped the voices on each other yet again, you know, adding a little performance aspect, hey, that was between the sweethearts.

I don't think there was anything wrong with Sam when I met her, just the usual quirks, God knows I had mine, persistent shoplifting fantasies among them. Sometimes I was a little worried about a particular belief she had that felt completely in conflict with her hyperrational views on science and nature and religion. Since she was maybe nine or ten, she told me, she'd been occasionally convinced that an unseen presence lingered on the margins of her life, observing her. It was like part of her Self had broken off early on, gone its own way, formed into a walking being more confident than her, and would return occasionally to just watch her from afar. She'd always felt it was a male presence. Once at a concert at Sylvester Park I saw her staring strangely at a person far off in the blanket and beach chair section, and she confessed that certain vague facial characteristics or mannerisms struck her as belonging to that mysterious other.

It only hits me every few years, this feeling, she said pensively. *It just never went away.* Kind of like the remnants of an OCD thing I once had, I thought, where to this day out of nowhere I'll find it very preferable to even out the number of steps I take from point A to point B.

I gave her a hug and reassured her INSANITY SCAN NEGATIVE. Sam's mind was strong in 2013, her will was strong. I blame the airfield incident for everything.

Just before Thanksgiving, Sam revealed to me a juicy little secret, which was that her parents had big-time money, having been early pioneers in designing decision-making software for small businesses. So when it came time for her to fly home for the holiday to Oysterville, the arrangement was not quite normal. Her parents allowed their employees to shuttle around the Pacific northwest on a private jet if they needed, so Sam was going to hop on it as she usually did each year, and make the ninety-minute flight from tiny Pasqueflower Airport in Delphi over to Colfax. Clearly I had made a good choice in potential life partners. So I drove her to the flight early Wednesday evening. We got to Pasqueflower at about 6:40.

Now, big-time money didn't mean *insane* money, so what her parents did was list the jet with a charter company to deliver anyone else who might want to pay to be flown in that area, meaning there would be six Hibiscus Software employees on board and about a half dozen regular folk, all gliding around in a Gulfstream that seated twenty. The weather was really bad that night, rainy and kind of foggy, and I wondered whether the flight might be cancelled, but there was no ice yet, with the temperature hovering safely above freezing. The fields around South Bay had been frosted over already for days thanks to a powerful cold front. Temperatures were supposed to drop further around midnight. Parking at Pasqueflower was a breeze and free, so I decided to wait with Sam inside the cute little terminal, which was surprisingly filled with people.

Things were a little off between me and Sam that night. We'd maybe been getting on each other's nerves a bit about my job situation, and we hadn't gone anywhere or done anything remotely exciting for many weeks, so it was probably for the best we were having a five-day break. We kissed goodbye and she walked out across the tarmac onto the plane at 7:20, huddling under her umbrella. She turned and gave me an exaggerated wave as she climbed up the steps into the cabin. I bought hot cocoa from a little cart a nice older lady had set up in the terminal and hung out until the plane started to taxi away.

Little things about that night come back to me again and again, and I suppose they always will. The cute design of a sleeping cat on that cup of cocoa, the classical music playing in the terminal, and especially the faces of the few other people who had been waiting nearby for the Colfax flight. Sam and I had talked to one of them briefly. Her name was Shanise. She was a hypercaffeinated senior in high school travelling home after a debate club tournament, and she wouldn't know if her side had won the final or not for another week, and she was absolutely agonizing over it.

On the plane, after settling in, Sam found herself sitting very close to Shanise and they kept talking, and Sam also talked to a very late arrival named Matty Snider, who she knew personally. He'd been the head of sales at Hibiscus since the very beginning. She'd liked him as a little kid because he'd always had an endless supply of funky toys in his office, and her parents would park her there and she'd play with them, never wanting to leave. A goofy chubby fun uncle was Matty Snider, a widower since 2010.

The visibility on the tarmac was lousy and was going to stay that way. Through the windows of the plane, Sam didn't see much but fog and indistinct lights. The plane's ground roll toward its takeoff position was interrupted for about five minutes for reasons the passengers didn't understand. I had actually started to walk out of the terminal when I saw the plane stop out there, small in the

darkness. I couldn't even read the letters and numbers on its side anymore through the formless wet murk the night had become.

I figured it was just the usual unexplained delay, so I headed out to my car. Sam could always text me if there was a real problem. At no point did the sheer number of small planes out there on the tarmac concern me, because what did I know about what was normal. I didn't know there had been a sudden flooding problem at Olympia Regional that was causing planes to reroute to Pasqueflower, and there was some shuffling going on to make enough room for everybody. The small ground control crew had a lot to deal with, a lot. The radio message that guided Sam's plane to runway 2C instead of 2A at the last minute was never confirmed properly.

I drove away, cursing the weather, avoiding the highway and taking a back road toward home instead. On the Gulfstream, at about 7:45, Sam was looking out the window across runway 2A and watching the blinking of a radio tower far away, distorted by the rain. The plane began to shake strangely, but not because of its engines. They were still powered mostly down. A Hibiscus employee looking out the opposite side said something very loudly in reaction to a startling visual out there. All he got out was the meaningless exclamation *What?*

Sam didn't even get a chance to fully turn around. She saw a curious bright green flash of light fall across the face of a woman sitting nearby. And then, nothingness. No more memory. The Beechcraft Premier 1 that was attempting to take off from runway 1B struck Sam's plane at an inexact perpendicular.

It was the entire night and half the morning before I got to the hospital, and it was only through a habitual and unhealthy check of the news online that I realized what had happened. Sam hadn't texted to let me know she'd gotten to Colfax, but we didn't really do that kind of thing. That felt a little clingy to us both. If I hadn't seen the news, well, her parents didn't even have my contact information.

I met them at the hospital for an agonizing and awkward first meeting, and the doctor there explained that Sam was alive and stable. Concussion, four broken bones including her hip, burns to her lower legs and right arm that might require surgery down the line. Two people on her plane had been killed, and so had the pilot of the Beechcraft that had pulled up at the last second but couldn't get vertical fast enough to avoid destroying both planes, sending machinery and bodies across the tarmac. Two of the hospitalized developed severe pneumonia because of their time lying there on the pavement in the cold rain as people flooded out of the terminal to try to help. And strangely, one of the people on board Sam's plane was still missing. This was Shanise Lander, the talkative young debate champ we had both spoken to.

Sam's phone had been lost but her folks assured me they would have her call or try to text me as soon she was able. We weren't even allowed to truly see her yet, heavy sedation. That left only a series of daily updates from her parents on her very slowly improving condition. Nice people they were, ex-hippies who had unexpectedly struck it rich, dedicated as ever to saving the earth and helping the poor, and given to what Sam called tiresome handwringing over their guilt about being wealthy even as their tastes kept getting more extravagant. Every day I spoke with them I felt more entrenched in the family, years of familiarity unnaturally compressed into two weeks.

Finally Sam and I reconnected by phone, and then I was able to see her alone. She had a private room with a nice view of downtown; we could even see the museum where we'd met. Predictably,

we had no words at first and just held each other and cried a little. She was grateful that I didn't have to see her with all her bruises. Still prominent on the right side of her face was a sort of half-moon colored a sunset orange. In the end, she was in the hospital for a total of eighteen days, and then her physical rehab began. She was not exactly overwhelmed by visitors outside of extended family: her old college roommate, two people from the office. Like me, she hadn't built a lot of friendships, and she kept her co-workers at a distance.

It was a little heartbreaking when she told me she thought she might be going away for a while, staying with her parents all the way in Oysterville. The hurdles ahead of her seemed mostly to be psychological ones, and talking to a hospital counselor made her think it was best for her to isolate and be in a place utterly without obligations or pressures. Blankets, comfort food, family, her childhood things all around. I told her I understood. I figured the obvious sympathetic strategy was to nod and say yes to whatever she wanted, right? I told her I'd visit every day till she checked out of the hospital, but she said every other day was enough. We did have a laugh or two while she was there, and we watched *Walkabout* together on a portable DVD player, but of the future, there was no talk.

Leaving her room that last time before she was allowed to go home, I felt like I had maybe lost her to this tragedy and its uncertain aftermath, and the reset of our relationship was going to be long and painful. She told me she'd call me when she felt up for me driving to Oysterville to visit, but till then, she might be out of contact. She was taking some tentative psychiatric advice to stay away for a while from phones, the internet, even television. Real 19th century living till spring, anything to preserve calm. SAVE-SAMMIE-THROUGH-TECH-DEPRIVATION PROGRAM INITIATED, she joked darkly. *Just these highly addictive painkillers are 21st century*, she said to me, one tear running down the side of her face as she touched the bed table beside her, still not able to reach her bottles of pills without discomfort. So I bought some fancy stationery and fancy envelopes and got ready to write a few letters.

I never heard back from the very first one I sent. A text to her father went unanswered as well, which seemed to be by Sammy's design. And that was the late winter of 2014. It seemed like there was nothing I could do that wouldn't be intruding on the recovery she wanted. So, beginning in early spring, I spent my pillow time before sleep at night preparing myself for a different head space, one where Sammie was simply someone I had been very, very fond of who was simply taken from me by a horrifying random event, and then the mental adjustment the patient required after it. I'd maybe exchange Christmas cards with her for a few years before the inevitable final fade. And maybe come summertime, the warmer weather would make getting out of bed every day seem to have some kind of point.

But there came a day when I just couldn't hold out any longer. I had to try to talk to her, though the silence had told me it very well might not be welcome. I texted her father again, not in a pleading way, very exploratory, and he did text back this time, a couple of hours later. Sammie was there with her parents still, her physical healing was more or less complete, and he asked me to call his number at about eight that night; she'd probably have the phone. In his second and last text that afternoon, he said he wasn't positive she'd be up for speaking. The hours leading up to that call were tense ones for me. I lay on top of my bed and for a long time I just stared at the ceiling.

I got four rings at 8:02 that night, and then I bust out smiling when Sam answered the phone GREETINGS HUMAN, YOUR FREE TRIAL PHONE CALL HAS BEGUN. And all that weight of the

months of silence melted away because of the stupid, wonderfully annoying robot voice, and my eyes filled with tears. I laughed. REQUEST RESULTS OF SAMMIE SOFTWARE SCAN, I said, which had been our standard replacement for *How are you?*, and she replied HARD DRIVE SLOWED BY JUNK FILES, 61 GIGABYTES.

I switched then to my standard boring Joel voice, the one that anguished experimental theatergoers hadn't been able to even hear properly for the last three years, but Sammie did not switch to hers. Oddly, she kept on with the robot even when it must have seemed clear I was ready to move back to human things. She wouldn't drop the silly ruse in answering questions about her bones healing or if she was getting bored there at all in remote Oysterville.

HUMAN SPEECH SETTING ON, I said to her, but there was only a long, odd silence after that. And then, finally, she said SETTING CORRUPTED, DROPDOWN MENU DEACTIVATED. Something about the continued robot voice on only a so-so cell phone connection was so off-putting, as opposed to hearing it from a face I knew so well. I didn't know how to reply to *Setting corrupted*. I tried to pick up where I left off, asking her if she was still thinking about me maybe driving out there sometimes, just so she could show me her parents' hedge maze or their moat, show me how the other half lived.

SCHEDULE UNCERTAIN, she answered me. Just two words.

Is it OK that I called? I asked. *You're not mad, are you?* She had to be, I thought, that's what the lack of humanity must have meant.

ANGER SCAN NEGATIVE, said robot Sammie.

I shifted gears. I asked her a question about something light, her opinion of the new Terence Davies movie, if she'd seen it, but the robot informed me her protocol for mass entertainments was still on pause. I mentioned some little tidbit of gossip I'd just heard about a mutual acquaintance's secret accumulation of parking tickets, but even that got a dry response from the automaton instead of Sammie.

I stared out the window of my ugly apartment in bleak Jefferson Street Towers, and I closed my eyes in frustration after almost every comment I made and every question I asked, because it was clear the human Sammie would not be speaking to me, and just maybe it was because she psychologically could not. By the time the clock tower in the strip mall to the west read 8:11, I couldn't take any more.

Gotta go for now, I said to her finally, very abruptly, trying to keep my voice steady. *Will you call me in a couple of weeks, even if you're not ready for a visit?*

SCHEDULE UNCERTAIN, she told me again.

I told her I missed her and hung up the phone. I walked like a zombie down eight flights of stairs and out into the street. I bought butter pecan ice cream I did not really want just to be among the crazy horde of students in Barney's Scoop Shack, to hear their chatter about stupid things I hadn't cared about for years.

On July 13, 2014, Sammie's mother invited me out of the blue to meet her and her husband for lunch while they were briefly in Olympia for a marketing conference. They had some better news

about Sammie they could share. I accepted immediately, without follow-up questions, and was content to be grateful for the contact, assuming they had realized the one conversation between Sammie and I had been a disaster. It was quite a gesture, what they did, but that was the kind of people her folks were, Jonah and Nina.

I think they figured I was still kind of poor and they wanted me to be at ease, because they said they were in the mood for a nice divey burger place. They just didn't realize the Camelot Burger Inn was a seedy dark bar lit red through most of the gloomy interior. They had to walk a delicate line sitting there in our dim back booth, sharing stuff about Sammie while not betraying the confidence she had with them or with her new doctor. They were hyperaware of not saying too much but slipped sometimes, meaning well. There was just no way to avoid it. Nina would lightly poke Jonah in the ribs, reminding him not to put words into the doctor's mouth or paraphrase Sammie too much, and he would comically slap his bald head and say *Forgive me, whose idea was it to let me be a parent?*

Sammie's psychiatrist was named Dr. Iris Ricks, a visiting scholar at Gonzaga University, from which I had graduated eight years before. Sammie's parents had spent a considerable amount of money and even plied some personal connections and a favor to have Ricks take her on as a patient. The woman was extremely in demand.

Sammie's recovery arc, they told me when our dry burgers had been set indifferently before us, began with some group therapy specific to survivors of the accident through St. Luke's, and from there, Ricks had gotten her into a more freeform group situation for six weeks at Whitman in Colfax. Sammie had tentatively turned down one-on-one talk therapy. It was at St. Luke's that she had adopted the unusual habit of, well, speaking like a robot sometimes, often very much out of context. It was something her folks told me she'd done very rarely on and off through her life. Ricks was of the belief that the voice was a kind of emotional retreat in uncertain times and situations. By reducing herself to a machine, Sammie was subconsciously pushing away her free will, and too much free will, the possibility of making wrong choices, seemed to be a source of great strain for her. Then the accident happened. The stress of group therapy and the strain of carrying buried memories of that night—memories her subconscious was beginning to push in on her—had perhaps triggered her into a state of increased robotics, for the lack of a better word. The less human she was, the less frightened she could be of her own mind turning against her.

Dr. Ricks thought it was best to let the voice and Sammie's emotionally distant behavior run its course. She should still be at home, and outside of group therapy for a while to better determine if that had been too triggering. If nothing changed fairly soon, Ricks might recommend removing the protective shell around her life a little to get her interacting more with people in non-therapeutic environments, and she'd then raise again the prospect of one-on-one sessions.

Ricks had told them that what was going on with Sam was unusual but not totally unforeseen. It was a strange time, but she'd likely be Sammie again in full soon enough. She'd advised her parents to keep one phrase always in mind: *No pressure. Let the stricken walk their path. We might get very scared because we didn't understand where Sammie's path was going, but somewhere inside herself, she knew.* Everyone needed to trust her.

I think in the end I wound up asking all of one question that day, which was about how much Sammie actually recalled of the accident. That was when I first learned in general about what she had seen and heard inside the plane. Everything beyond that moment of intruding bright green light had been suppressed, everything. Ricks apparently saw some value in that, but she hadn't explained to Nina and Jonah exactly what she'd meant. I never asked about whether Sammie even knew about that day's lunch, or if she ever spoke of me.

Someone joined us after our real talk, coming directly from that conference: a large guy with a graying red beard, confined to a wheelchair since the previous winter. It was Matty Snider, still director of sales for Hibiscus Software, survivor of the airfield incident, rescued from the cabin of the Gulfstream, then having endured two surgeries to save his spleen. We shook hands and he grinned widely and warmly. Half his face was still reddened from his burns. As he pushed himself outside onto the sidewalk, Matty's cell phone chimed in an unusual way, and after looking confused for a moment, he laughed. "My dating app, telling me I have a match," he said. "I forgot to delete it after I got burned, crippled, and spleen-challenged!" Matty continued to make jokes to lighten the mood as he waited for his cab. Before we parted, he reached up and slapped me strongly on the back, gave me his card, and winked. Anytime I wanted to get my butt handed to me in backgammon, to which I had claimed some expertise, I should look him up.

There was something so different about him. Driving home, it occurred to me I may have just met that incredibly rare person in life who did not just have a healthy gallows humor about the darkness that enfolds us, and a positive attitude in the face of crisis. I think Matty Snider, just a jovial uncle figure to Sammie when she was very young, might have been indomitable, one of life's quiet and relentless rowers, rowing against every brutal tide with a heart that cannot be shattered.

It got dark out as I drove home, just one exit off Route 5. Still, I popped into my favorite rest stop just because I had a shameful weakness for the awful coffee in its vending machines. Coming out of that little brick hut, I stood for a moment sipping and looking off at the forlorn picnic area beside the building with the bathrooms in it.

There was someone standing beside one of the cheap plastic picnic tables, just kind of looking at me from afar. No food beside her on the table or anything, no backpack, nothing like that. A girl, a teenager, in a dark sweater and an open coat despite the time of year. Headlights flowed a hundred yards beyond her in a furious blinking array. I was a little unsettled by her stare, so I turned a bit abruptly and walked back to my car.

Rolling out of the lot I noticed she wasn't there anymore, she'd moved. There had been a disturbing hint of familiarity about her. I was in my apartment throwing my Styrofoam cup away when it occurred to me where I'd seen someone who looked just like her: in the terminal at Pasqueflower Airport. *The debate judges are power addicts*, she'd said to me and Sammie before she'd shuffled out with the other passengers onto the tarmac and onto the Gulfstream.

Sammie did not get that much better, not then. From her parents I found out that she did finally agree to one-on-one therapy with Dr. Ricks, but to do so she had to move down to Eugene, where she'd been set up with a little apartment. So she was now two hundred and twenty miles away from me. She got back to communicating normally for the most part, but sometimes slipped back into her robot voice, apologizing for it later. I resumed my unspectacular life, and there were only occasional updates from her folks. Sammie had gotten remote work hand-editing scientific manuscripts; she continued to see Dr. Ricks; and normality was becoming a real goal. But Sammie never did write to me, never called me. *She likes it in Oregon*, her father texted me apologetically. *She likes being near the ocean*. I re-read that a few times, thinking *That's it, those last six words are*

the last time I'll ever hear from Jonah and Nina Cash. It was all right. I had long since begun to consciously let Sammie go.

I wasn't dating, God knows. I found my loneliness to be familiar and comfortable, at least until I left my theater group. It wasn't rewarding anymore to write or act in plays that tried amateurishly to plumb the depths of anger and sadness, to lease a maturity about sorrow I didn't really own. Now that I'd had the experience of getting truly close to genuine tragedy, I felt ashamed at having fumbled around the pretend version on a stage, fabricating those emotions based on so little life experience, playing with them like a kid uses a Slinky, to entertain myself, indulge myself. What happened to Sammie made fiction seem farcical, so I wanted out of it.

Even my movie snobbery was failing me. The harmless worlds of Freddy Krueger or Roger Moore's James Bond, which made no pretense of addressing the conundrum of human pain, had a new appeal for me. When I left *The Angry Snowmen*, my friendships there dissolved more or less, as I always thought they might, and I was truly, for the first time since my first days at college as an angst-ridden freshman, alone.

Then, three weeks before the anniversary of the accident, Sammie called me. The *real* Sammie. It was a good catch-up call, the one I never thought would happen. She sounded fine, seemed like her old self almost. She'd kept working remotely. She was very amused by my own strides toward conformity, namely, having accepted an office job for an insurance group and now edging dangerously close to a promotion, possibly. Yes, I had sold out a little, clinging to casual Fridays as a salvation for my artsy soul.

She invited me down to Eugene, promised to give me the whole tour of the town. Her tone told me it was not an empty invitation. I had gleaned enough from the conversation to know she hadn't really made any friends down there. And so the week before Thanksgiving, I drove down the I-5 feeling weird and apprehensive, yes, but also happy. I had a sense of completion. What I expected was a nice companionable visit and at its end, a necessary goodbye that seemed more fitting than our awful phone call in the spring. Ex-sweethearts getting together on the Oregon coast for one last friendly check-in, to write the end of the story in a bittersweet but acceptable way. No robot voices were invited, and none appeared unexpectedly.

And of course what happened was that I couldn't seem to leave. Driving, talking, coffee, lunch, dessert, walking endlessly from place to place: I forget the order it all happened, but I was going to be comically late in getting back on the road, and then in a coffeehouse and gift shop, Sammie said to me, *Dr. Ricks is a godsend, I'm doing great. Don't go back tonight, my place is big enough to be embarrassing, you know how my parents insist on helping.*

And of course I stayed. I think I probably would have even if she didn't seem so much like she used to, so funny and awkward and prone to fumbling over words in a rush to get them out, and full of her usual sunshiny venom towards all our favorite old targets, even though she consciously hadn't even brushed against pop culture for almost a year and I had to fill her in on lots of, well, nonsense, most of it film-related. Her hair was much longer but still carelessly tended to. It made her more alluring to me yet powerfully different, a different version of the same person. She'd gotten a cat too, Bernie Bernbaum.

I stayed the night, and then we agreed without speaking that I'd stay for another one, and there was no doubt our jigsaw pieces were locked together again, and I felt so peaceful on the way back north

I pulled over beside a pretty cemetery outside of Wilsonville and just sat there in the sun beside a fountain, munching on a slice of convenience store pizza, in humble awe of the complexity of it all, love's maze of baffling circuitry. I was still young enough then to believe secretly in happy endings.

I spent the oddest Thanksgiving of my young life with Sammie and her parents at their modest mansion in Oysterville. Jonah and Nina seemed genuinely happy to see me again. It was there that the non-digital lifestyle Sammie had adopted really asserted itself, and I experienced how different it was. Sammie's Dad and I had been talking geekily about football before the turkey came out but that night, there was no TV in the corner with the games on, and no predictable post-meal movie with the family. There was just cozy talking, and later, an especially confrontational game of Upwords. Originally, the information-and-entertainment detox that Sammie's first doctor had recommended was designed partially to keep her away from any troubling news about the accident. Now, without a cellphone, without cable, without a computer or social media, Sammie seemed to be living on a slightly elevated plane of existence. When she got up every day now, she wasn't immediately given twelve reasons to hate the world or feel obligated to respond to it. She lived locally, among the people and things she knew well and was fond of. The frantic clashings and boiling points in society had become meaningless. She caught up to them when she felt like it, and got most of her information and world view from reading three-month old issues of *Dissent* magazine. I hadn't myself been able to keep away from the awful clickbait that had drawn me into the fate of young Shanise Lander, and couldn't stop thinking of what it might do to Sammie to read about that particular narrative as it had unfolded in the days after the accident.

We went to the ocean a couple of times, which to me has always been a place where time stops and aging ceases. At the coast I felt like I was eternally ten years old, Sammie too I think. *The folks are working at a mission in San Francisco for Christmas*, she told me in mid-December. *What are you going to be doing?*

We were at Searose Beach when she asked me that, big cups of takeout coffee in our hands, the Pacific vast before us, and finally, a little money in my pocket. *Let's just drive the coast*, I suggested. I liked the idea of a wandering, illogical drive slamming a door on the bad things that had happened. It was the kind of irresponsible anti-holiday maneuver only the truly young and free would try. So I wanted to do it.

And we *almost* made it work.

How did Dr. Ricks work her magic? was how I phrased the question that nearly ended our togetherness for the second time. We were sitting on the screened-in front porch of a little Airbnb in Neskowin, and it was night, and raining. I might have been able to go forever not knowing just how Sammie had been repaired, saved maybe. But I asked. It was really the dumb question of a layperson baffled by the mysteries of psychiatry. Through knowing Sammie, I had become both shaken and impressed by the malleability of the human mind.

Here is what she told me: There had come a critical point in her therapy when she seemed to be recovering memories of the actual accident, and she was not responding to this well at all. It was then that Dr. Ricks had made the decision to try an alternative sort of treatment she had researched and tested off and on for years, and written about extensively. She called it "Carrier and Comfort." Through hypnosis, she had asked Sammie to visualize the construction of a kind of memory lockbox. It was six feet high, this imaginary box, Sammie told me. Looked a lot like an old-school

phone booth. Into this glass box went her emerging memories of the accident, which, if they made her way fully into her conscious thoughts, could drag her back into a deep depression.

Sammie was asked to imagine those memories clasped by a living, breathing being locked inside that box. To imagine sending both it and the memories away forever, so that they could never return to harm her. Not kill them, no, because they were part of her after all, and to turn them into enemies was unwise. They and the carrier were just being asked to live a life far away.

Dr. Ricks's voice, which sometimes came to Sammie under hypnosis in the form of beautiful calligraphic notes on red pieces of paper, said, *Now let's give the carrier that robot voice to take away with him, what do you say?* And Sammie had said, *Yes, I want to give that away.*

And then from Dr. Ricks: *Let's give the carrier a name. He's not a villain, Sammie, so let's give him a name before we say goodbye to him.*

And Sammie had laughed a little, and she laughed again when she told me this on the dark porch of that Airbnb by the ocean. *He should have a robot name,* she'd said.

Dr. Ricks said that was just fine. And so the robot carrier clutching Sammie's potentially traumatic memories to his chest was christened *41584*, which was her birthday plus one day.

Sammie remembered images of her pushing the giant glass box on a rolling cart along a sidewalk beside a great rushing river in the woods. She'd pushed the box off the cart, down an embankment, and the rapids had taken it away. *What if he gets out?* Sammie had asked Dr. Ricks, worried, to which had come a soothing reply. *The river is going all the way to the other side of the world, Sammie. It doesn't matter. 41584 is welcome to speak robot in Polynesia.*

Remembering all this, Sammie was not even now entirely sure what she'd said and heard under hypnosis, or even what had been dreams or a part of live sessions whose memories had become hazy. She only knew that after only about six more hours of talk therapy, she felt almost as light and as free sometimes as she had when she was in her early twenties. No trace of emerging memories of the airfield. And certainly no desire to speak in the robot voice.

Were there ever any drugs involved, any medication? I asked her.

Just the usual stuff, to help keep me in the hypnotic state, she said. Sitting close beside me on a wicker sofa, she had begun to sense the doubt in my voice, the worry.

How did she put you under? I asked. She told me the method was very simple. Sammie had sat at a table and been asked to move her hands across its surface in wide arcs, wide rotations, very gently, and she counted upward starting at 1, visualizing each number as a tree with more leaves on it. When she got to a tree that was completely verdant, she would tumble head over heels into the forest, which was the hypnotic state. *Cute, but strange,* Sammie said.

I got up then and went up to the screen, looking out toward the water, trying to take this all in. *You mean, basically,* I said, *that the method she picked was total denial.*

Carrier and Comfort, Sammie said, a bit of irritation edging into her voice. *The name was very carefully chosen.*

So what happens if you suddenly do remember everything sometime? I asked. *Is it going to make everything worse now?*

Why would it? she said, and I said, *Well, I don't know, it just sounds like some kind of... wish fulfillment fantasy.*

And that statement turned the talk stressful for her, and she got a little angry, and I closed my eyes and took it all back. I apologized, I didn't know what I was talking about, of course Dr. Ricks was the expert, and we tried to get past it. Later, long after we'd laid down to sleep with the sound of the waves far away, Sammie rested her head on my chest and whispered, *You can't understand the sadness of hoping for one day of feeling what you used to be like*, and I didn't answer. I just held her, and we drifted away, and the next day was better, the next day was all about a used bookstore with a stone tiger out front, and just down the road, the best raisin challah we'd ever tasted.

My own research into Dr. Iris Ricks only took a day or so, sitting in the college library when I got back to Olympia. One of her three books was even in the stacks on the second floor, it was about child psychology. Her book on Carrier and Comfort therapy had been digitized through the University of Washington. The articles I could access about this technique online were responsibly peer-reviewed, and so were two strong rebuttals of her work.

I read a couple of case studies online in the tomblike quiet of the library. One concerned a victim of a random act of street violence in Queens; the other was the case of a man who had tried everything to address his alcoholism but failed. In the former case, the patient had created a sort of blind and mute half-brother through hypnosis, while the alcoholic had been asked to transfer his urges to an imagined gentle giant who carried a teddy bear. In neither case had the therapy completely served its purpose, but it had bought both patients a lot of stable time to work on their issues.

I watched a video of Ricks, speaking on some panel. She was younger than I thought she'd be, had an easy demeanor and a cheerful sense of humor about popping her P's into her microphone. I could make out that she even had a tattoo on her neck, it looked like a sandcastle. On that panel, she happened to reveal that the origins of Carrier and Comfort came from her own experience as a post-graduate in California coping with an attack by a blood-drinking killer named Jody Burr. This made me feel *more* uneasy.

After the library I swung by the student center for old times' sake—God knows I'd spent too much time as an undergrad there eating junk food and avoiding studying by watching baseball highlights on the TV bolted over an air hockey table. I sat for a while just before the campus staff started closing the place down for the night and students drifted back to their dorms.

The TV was turned to the local ten o'clock news. The second story was about the lawsuit that the parents of Shanise Lander had just filed against Pasqueflower Airport and two related entities for negligence in what happened to their daughter not just in the crash of November 2013, but what happened immediately afterwards.

I was riveted again by the story. Like so many others, I couldn't look away even as I prayed Sammie was still protected from all of this. And that night was when I had the worst nightmare of my life, lying alone in my apartment, a nightmare stitched together from the real facts I knew from the news, which then got stylized by the cruelest corners of my subconscious.

In the dream, I saw a bright green light flash over the face of a passenger named Wendy Dahl five seconds before the Beechcraft crashed into the Gulfstream and sent *me* tumbling through the air and onto the rain-drenched tarmac beneath the planes. I heard a roar and felt a rolling tide of pure yellow heat flow over and past me like a flaming barrel. I heard Sammie crying out. She was saying *Where is my Slinky? Where is my Slinky?* I heard a man screaming *Over here, over here, we need oxygen!*

I was paralyzed below the chest. I lifted my head off the tarmac. Something enormous was on fire nearby. The cold rain sizzled off metal surfaces.

I saw a figure far away. Shanise Lander was walking slowly away from the wreckage of the planes. Bystanders and samaritans were running everywhere, but no one seemed to notice Shanise, or they thought that she, too, was someone out there trying to help. Maybe she'd spotted another survivor.

At the moment of impact, one of the wheels of the Beechcraft had been flung so hard into the fencing a hundred yards south of the runway that it had collapsed a portion of it. Shanise was headed that way, wearing her winter coat, drenched by the rain. Her backpack had been left behind. In shock, she walked across the fence boundary and started across a small snow-covered field toward the white woods beyond. In the dream she got smaller and smaller in my vision. I opened my mouth to tell someone tending clumsily to my injuries that there had been a girl on the plane, and she was wandering away from the wreckage, but no sound came out.

Shanise suddenly dropped clumsily out of sight, barely having time to throw her arms up to break her fall. A hole had opened up in the thin ice of the tiny pond whose surface she had errantly wandered onto. Just two feet of water. But it was enough to swallow her up, unseen. I saw it happen in my nightmare. Shanise the debate champ. The trees beyond seemed to keep waiting for her to emerge from that little hole. She never did. When they found her the next morning, it seemed inconceivable that it could have happened the way it did. But in the chaos and confusion and panic, that was, based on all the known evidence, *exactly* the way it happened. That was the part of the whole story that few who knew it could forget.

I was a wreck at work the day after that dream. I sent an email to my boss after lunch and told him I wasn't feeling well and was going home. It would be fine. My new job had a good personal leave policy. It had a good everything. I went in every day, sat in front of a computer for eight hours, then went home. With the nice paychecks I was getting I had begun, for the first time in my life, to casually narcotize myself with all the things I'd never been able to afford before, including all the latest digital and robotic conveniences. High-end cell phone. Cable package with all the movie channels. Refrigerator with ice cube maker. Ford Taurus with heated seats and Bluetooth capability. And even a pre-order for a new thing that Apple had coming out, a watch that could flow in harmony with your laptop. Had a new one of those, too. These were the things that were comforting me and erecting cushiony walls against the nagging sense that all my creative impulses were quietly fading into my past. If Sammie wanted a powerful mechanical device to take her anguish halfway across the world, I seemed to now own quite a few of them... and every day I felt like I was becoming a kind of device myself, harmlessly, painlessly, just like everyone I knew, all of us joined in an elite class of cheerful robot-human hybrids synchronizing our calendars, our playlists, and our anxieties.

On December 6, Sammie and I were together at her apartment. I was staying the weekend. It had been a pretty good day; we'd gone for a hike and cooked dinner in.

Sometime well past midnight I woke up, becoming aware that she'd gotten out of bed and was sitting at her work desk in the dark, but turned the wrong way around, facing the bed.

She explained to me what she was feeling, and had been feeling most of the last two days. A few hours before I'd come into Eugene, she'd been down the street picking up some tea for us and she'd heard a random mechanical ratcheting sound from somewhere nearby, like one heavy metal object

was having trouble lifting another—the kind of thing you hear several times a month living in a city. But this time, it had gotten into her mind that the sound had been made intentionally, to let her know that someone who had gone away was back. It was a little friendly signal. I nodded and told her I got it, though of course I couldn't possibly.

She'd gotten out of bed twenty minutes before when the final image of a nightmare had woken her. She'd been standing on a vast frozen lake with a strange, almost Martian-like planet low in the sky. It was beaming intense orange light all around, a permanent sunset. Some tall man with no discernable facial features was walking toward Sammie across the ice, slowly and clumsily, his arms outstretched, beckoning. Each step as he got closer sent another mechanical ratcheting sound through it, right into the bottoms of her feet, where the sound vibrated and locked her feet firm to the ice so she could not run away.

I thought it was 41584, she said. I thought he wanted to hurt me.

She was due to meet Dr. Ricks that week. She did go. Sammie later reported there wasn't too much cause for alarm. The man on the ice may have even been a manifestation of her old imagined doppelganger, the one she used to imagine was out there somewhere, watching her, tracking her life, benignly. She'd never mentioned that belief since the accident.

Never had one of those manifestations before, though, have you, in your dreams? I asked her. And she could only reply, *No.*

The spiral, as I think of it, a spiral leading down, swift and irrevocable, began only a week later.

In the early morning of December 13th, a rock climbing instructor named Lucas Thorpe, who lived in Malone-Porter, about thirty miles away from my apartment, became overwhelmed with concern about a strange silence from his younger brother Dennis, who he'd been expecting a call from for a day and a half. Dennis Thorpe, age thirty-four, currently unemployed, had lived alone for the last three years in a tiny A-frame house in the woods, a cute structure he'd bought and built himself for less than thirty thousand dollars. Because of a recent traumatic event Dennis had suffered, Lucas had made a point to keep in touch with him more often. They'd agreed to go Christmas shopping together for their mother and sister that afternoon in the city, but Dennis hadn't called back to confirm the day or night before. And now there was no answer to several cell phone calls. This was especially concerning because Dennis had seemed unsettled by a mysterious call he'd received two nights before but hadn't been able to give his older brother many details on. He'd said only that a strange person talking like a machine had twice whispered something into the phone about a correction that was needed to his programming, and then the line had gone dead.

At about 9 a.m. on the 13th, Lucas got in his car and nervously drove the eleven miles to Dennis's little house, which was secluded down a country lane called Widow's Fair. When Lucas arrived at the property, a small and crudely fashioned woodland oasis, he saw that Dennis's pickup truck was parked over near the woodpile, but there was no answer to knocks at the front door. Finally Lucas tried the doorknob and found it unlocked.

There was very little to the A-frame house; the entirety of its interior was more or less visible from the front doorway. Lucas saw immediately that the door to the bedroom, the only enclosed room in the house, was open, and in there, the bedding—blankets, sheets—had been entirely removed

from Dennis's bed. Getting closer, it appeared that the headboard had sustained a single blow from a sharp object, leaving a long gouge in it. Lucas didn't know if it had ever been there before, but it stuck with him.

Lucas made a wide walking circle around the property, calling out for his brother. His attention went back to the pickup truck beside the woodpile. Lucas walked over to it then around it, and saw a bundle of blue bedding dumped there beside the stacks of firewood.

Dennis was wrapped inside the bedding, partially propped up against the side of his truck. His head had been partially crushed through more than two dozen blows by a sharp instrument which had left deep wounds spanning his entire forehead, where the focus of the attack had been concentrated. Blood in the grass and dirt close by suggested that Dennis might have been rendered unconscious in the bedroom by an initial attack, then beaten more brutally once he had been dragged outside, perhaps regaining consciousness and fighting back.

The killer had clumsily etched two words, just barely legible, into the GMC's right rear door panel it, creating a crude headstone. The letters spelled out the words FAULTY HUMAN.

The media was quick to learn exactly who Dennis Thorpe was, though those two words on the rock were kept secret from it. The news broke quickly that the air traffic controller blamed for the miscommunication that led to the Pasqueflower Airport disaster the previous November had been found gruesomely murdered.

Sammie and I were back in our respective apartments when the murder of Dennis Thorpe happened, and she called me two days later as she was riding a bus downtown to speak to someone from the Washington State Police, who were sending someone from their jurisdiction to Eugene to talk to her informally. She sounded very calm. She had gotten her only information directly from the police, not from the news. I wasn't able to break away, not just yet, so I told her to hang on for just another day and I'd come.

The talk with the police seemed mostly informational and meant to calm her and reassure her, but its urgency felt unusual, and she went through a surreal moment when she knew that despite what she called the detective's subtlety and delicacy, he was obligated to inquire about her alibi for the late-night and possibly morning of Dennis Thorpe's murder. Sammie didn't exactly have one that was airtight. She was asked about the people she either knew or associated with on the plane and in her therapy afterward, pressed lightly for relevant details about anyone who seemed to have had an unusually strong reaction to the accident's aftermath.

Sammie's questioning lasted only about a half an hour. She returned to her apartment at a little past seven p.m. and got under the covers. Far to the north, Dennis Thorpe's tiny house in the woods had been roped off and was being guarded by two policemen watching the dark.

Alone, unable to sleep, Sammie got up at about ten and decided to get out of the apartment, go somewhere, anywhere. There were a few things she needed from the grocery store, so she walked two blocks to Albertson's. It would close at eleven, so it was just her and a handful of other shoppers wandering the quiet aisles.

She was in the pasta section looking for orzo when something unusual caught her eye. On the top shelf where the sauces were, someone had cleared out a little space and stacked six jars of Prego marinara in a simple pyramid. Not a formal display, no, just a bit of spontaneous and meaningless

activity, as if a child had become bored waiting for their mom to make her choices. But it was way too high for a child to have done.

Sammie found herself staring at those jars. They meant nothing, surely, but the simplicity of the structure made her imagine it was the kind of thing a robot might have decided to build, to maybe test its dexterity skills, and then been pleased with. Almost perfectly symmetrical, the labels all facing the exact same way. Project accomplished. Human being practice completed.

Sammie looked up to see someone all the way down the aisle smiling at her. A very large bald man in a store apron, grinning inappropriately wide. *Do you need any help?* he asked her, walking forward. Sammie turned away from him without a word. She left her grocery basket sitting on the floor, and she hurried out of the store. She was shaking when she got back into bed, her pulse still pounding.

In Olympia, I was lying awake, trying not to call her yet again to see how she was doing. And nearby, the police were learning a lot from their talks with St. Luke's hospital staff, enough to make a delicate call to Sammie at eleven. Detective Emmitt Claypool recommended to her the notion that she be in the company of someone she knew for a little while. In other words, it might be safer to not be alone in her apartment. The ringing of the phone had woken her from another terrible nightmare of a faceless phantom pounding on a glass tomb and screaming its own name over and over again: *41584, 41584, I am 41584!*

In the minutes after the fatal collision on the runway at Pasqueflower Airport thirteen months before, more than a hundred people ran off the terminal and onto the tarmac through the pouring rain, creating a great deal of confusion. Many samaritans were able to provide valuable help, while some could only stand, bewildered, unable to, and some even got in the way of first responders, who managed to wave everyone back to safety over the course of twenty minutes. Among that mass of terrified humanity, Shanise Lander may have seemed like just another wandering soul, tragically overlooked, though no one claimed to have noticed her.

There was one other important player in the drama of that night who no one seemed to notice much. It took piecing together many people's fragmented memories to make this other person's story clear.

His name was George Vidhor. He was twenty-nine years old and was at the airfield that night only to drop off a job application for a part-time position as a small aircraft refueler. He had taken a bus from the edge of Delphi, then still had to walk a half mile through the cold and the rain. When the collision happened and the runway exploded in hot flashes of yellow and orange and white, he joined the crowd making their way outside to help. Those few who remembered glimpsing him said they thought he didn't do too much. Just watched, mostly. He was tall, over six feet, swaddled in a puffy down jacket that was ripped in several places. He had it scrunched up almost to his eyes.

About thirty minutes after the crash, when Shanise Lander had already vanished and died, when almost everyone other than official medical and fire and police personnel had been moved back into the terminal, George Vidhor was for some reason still out there, and lurking dangerously close to a section of the Beechcraft's burning fuselage. A spontaneous settling of its components caused by the intense heat of the flames suddenly toppled a great steel mass, and it crushed Vidhor's lower leg. He had to be pulled out from underneath, screaming, and was rushed to the hospital among many others. He was bedbound in pain for three weeks, a titanium rod permanently embedded in

his right leg. Like all the other survivors of the accident, he was visited several times by mental health counselors, and eventually, he was offered a series of free group therapy sessions to help him work through what he saw and experienced on that night. He agreed to attend. That was where he met Sammie. Sammie had never told me about George Vidhor, and about how deeply strange he was eventually revealed to be.

The advice of the police that Sammie not be alone because there might be a chance the killer of Dennis Thorpe had specific hostilities involving the accident frightened us both badly. They were legally obligated to be maddeningly vague. Sammie crashed the night of their call on her cat-sitter's sofa, and she and I agreed to meet and hunker down at her folks' house in Oysterville until we got more information. They would be flying in on Wednesday morning from helping Matty Snider's home health aide move him into his new retirement condo, so it would be just me and Sammie on Tuesday night. She would get there at about six. I decided to go down earlier than I even told her I would, because the last thing I wanted was for her to show up at that big house alone.

I pulled into the circular driveway at what I kept calling the mansion just as it was getting dark. The place wasn't precisely secluded; the neighbors on both sides were fairly close by. Everyone just had so much land that it was a hike to get to the next house over. Each house was of a price range well beyond my imagining, and the grounds of each were at least partially wooded, sometimes by careful design. The mansion even had a big pond out back where geese lived the good life, while the front lawn sloped gently downwards for a hundred yards, dotted with two winding pebbled footpaths with waist-high hedges snuggling against them.

I got out of the car and, having no key or familiarity with the security system, I couldn't do much but wait for Sammie. I hadn't been able to convince her to go back to using a cell phone just enough to text back and forth for my peace of mind, so aside from her first call that she was getting in her car and headed to Oysterville, there weren't going to be any updates unless she broke down and used the little no-contract phone her parents had begged her to keep in her glove compartment in case of emergency. *Thirty minutes on this little sucker just raring to go*, Sammie had reported.

For the first time I strolled the expansive front lawn alone, wishing I'd brought gloves with me, and then I went around to the back and stood beside the dark silent pond, looking off into the barren winter woods as the sky went fully dark. I got back in the car when I got too cold and closed my eyes to rest after taking one last look at the house. There were a couple of lights on inside, just for appearance's sake.

What I didn't realize then was that those symbolic lights were the only security system Jonah and Nina had for the house. True to their undying hippie beliefs, they didn't believe much in protecting mere possessions. Aside from the very basic locks on the outer doors of the place, there was very little stopping anyone from getting inside, for whatever purpose they might have had.

When George Vidhor was seventeen years old, he and his parents were victims of carbon monoxide poisoning in their small rural cabin in east Tacoma. The faulty design of the heater killed Melvin and Margaret Vidhor, and put George into a coma for two weeks. He never did return to school. He never lived with anyone after that.

At twenty-nine, he had never owned a computer, so he had no traceable online activity, not even through a library card. He did not own a cell phone, a car, or sign up for cable TV. No one who called themselves a friend to him was ever found. Detectives were eventually lucky to track down a couple of ex-teachers who had foggy memories of him, one of whom made the comment that George did not seem at all interested in his surroundings or the people in them, seemed generally lost in the world. Since the death of his parents, police had talked to him one time in his life. That was when the man who had been sued, on Melvin and Margaret Vidhor's behalf, for damages relating to the faulty heating system that had killed them was crushed in a hit and run accident.

George had been nineteen. Though he was listed as a person of interest in the case, no charges were ever filed. He'd never gotten a driver's license, but you don't need to take a test or own a vehicle title to figure out how to get behind a wheel and knock someone so hard into a wire fence that they are nearly cut in half.

With the financial settlement he'd received after his parents' deaths, he'd managed to eke out an unnoticed and unchallenged existence, moving around the Pacific northwest anonymously, living a non-life. Occasionally he would apply for a job, always something involving the operation of machinery, but he was never hired.

He said virtually nothing during group survivor therapy at St. Luke's, and certainly nothing memorable. One day while waiting for a session to begin, Sammie had lapsed once again into her robot voice when offering George Vidhor a piece of gum. He had responded likewise. The two of them went on to share this little voice from time to time. George took to it immediately and seemed to really like it when he and Sammie would speak exclusively in the voice, away from the other patients. They never exchanged much personal information, and Sammie remembered little about him except his insistence on greeting her as the Georgebot, commenting on the weather as Georgebot, chatting about empty and forgettable things as the Georgebot. GEORGE WILL VISUALIZE YOUR STRUCTURE LATER, he would say, and she'd say, THIS STRUCTURE HAS BEEN PROGRAMMED FOR REAPPEARANCE ON WEDNESDAY. Sammie, still at that time trapped in the most difficult mental storms of her life, found comfort in just rolling with the routine.

But then, George Vidhor vanished from group therapy without a word. By then, he'd listened to enough of Sammie's talk in the sessions to glean and figure out a fair amount about her personal life, including who she was related to and that she had been dating a man named Joel. Me.

Inevitably, the question of why Vidhor had left the group sessions so suddenly and permanently was investigated. And Sammie had only remembered that his responses to her simply stopped one day after she told him firmly she did not want the robot talk anymore. He had become completely silent, this odd character who, according to a counselor at St. Luke's, refused to go near personal computers, having an intense paranoia about mechanical parts he could not see and touch. Sammie recalled the look on his face as he sat in that last group session, offering absolutely nothing of himself to the conversation, as always. She said it was like something had both dawned in his eyes and a light had gone out entirely. She'd begun to wonder if there was something very wrong with him that no one knew about. Then, just like that, he was gone.

When police went through the possessions left behind in his room, they found a great deal of science fiction novels, nothing more recent than the mid-nineteen seventies. He seemed to read the genre to the exclusion of anything else, except for magazines like *Nuts and Volts*, *Popular Science*, and *Servo*.

He liked his research, did George. Liked to find things out on his own, in secret. In fact, a tollbooth ticket and fast food receipt left in his desk eventually suggested he'd found his way to Oysterville

before, a month after starting group therapy at St. Luke's, his obsession with Sammie already taking shape. God only knows how close to her, and to her parents, he had been without them ever knowing someone was watching.

Sammie pulled up at the mansion at six-thirty. Exhausted from too many emotions already that day, she hugged me somewhat stiffly and I didn't press her on anything. Nina and Jonah kept their fridge pretty well stocked and I made us some chicken with some brown rice and gravy, and Sammie surprised me by saying she wouldn't at all mind the sound of the TV, some sports thing I liked maybe, just in the far background. It would soothe her, those voices. So I put on a Blazers game and we listened to a couple of old records of hers in the small solarium that looked out over the back pond. We talked about the merits of the various film versions of *A Star is Born* and tried desperately to find some common ground in our opinions of *David and Lisa* and *Pretty in Pink*. The stress of the day wiped us out by about nine, and we decided to go to bed after her folks called to say they were still on schedule to roll in at noon the next day.

We didn't say much to each other as we lay in the dark, there in her bedroom decorated during one of her college years when her parents had first bought the house. An R.E.M. poster over the bed, the one-sheets for *All the Pretty Horses* and *Lost in Translation* beside the bathroom door, fading remnants of the younger Sammie who knew nothing of me. I ran a hand through her hair the way she liked, gently massaging her temple. Her hair had gotten so long. She'd been dressing a bit differently too, attempting sort of a different style, still very casual but with more carefully chosen color combinations, and she didn't have pure sweats-and-sneakers days anymore, like I still did, not really. Even her opinions seemed more forceful. Before I slept, I thought about how quickly we had essentially fallen into our old routine despite all the things that had been happening—a nice routine for me, comforting like it used to be. But it felt like something had to change, because she was changing, while I saw myself as rowing in place, only with more money to spend.

Turning over on my pillow, I couldn't stop myself from thinking about how briefly my time in the world and Sammie's time had intersected. I had about as much true understanding of her as I might of a portrait of her in a gallery I came to every day. I could linger at it for hours in a silent echoing room, and read the card on the wall about its history and its meaning, but in the end, it felt like the lights were always turned out around me, I always had to go back home alone, and that portrait could not belong to me.

4:49 a.m.

To this day, I can't precisely define the sound I heard that woke me up. I only know that it was something far away, and so subtle that I believe it was my subconscious that reacted to it more than my waking being. A thump, a click, I just don't know. Maybe only therapy could recover that knowledge.

Sammie looked very peaceful beside me. I was too warm. I climbed gently out of bed and before I turned the thermostat down just a little, I stood and listened for a minute. The house, so flawlessly built, did not creak or moan or allow the whistling of the wind to even slightly disturb the peace. I went to the window, which looked out over the back of the property.

Through the dark on that clear night I could see that the pond down there had partially frozen over as the temperature continued to fall. Everything out there had a grim gray cast to it, the pond's surface dull and lifeless. That weak ice would not support the weight of even a child, probably.

Only in the act of turning away from the window did I see him, at the furthest edge of my peripheral sight as the contents of the bedroom again swallowed almost my whole field of vision. A tall thin man standing before the pond, draped in an overcoat that went down past his knees, hands clasped behind his back, short messy hair blowing around his head. He was gone in an instant, a remnant of a dream that hadn't been able to find me in my sleep. No human, no ghost lingered out there in the cold. Yet I knew I had just seen Sammie's decades-old protector, the wanderer who did not really exist. That was him. A crazy thought took hold of me: *He's facing the wrong direction! He can't protect her looking that way!*

I formed my hands into fists to release the jitters. *All right, what's happening here?* I thought, and I slipped out of the bedroom into the hallway in my sweatpants and old t-shirt, leaving the door open behind me. I passed a spare bedroom on my left and was then at the top of a carpeted staircase that hooked down into the airy and expansive living room, which I could see spread out below me in total because of the fashionable open design. The room was dark like the rest of the house, except for the kitchen and master bedroom upstairs, where single bulbs struggled to push away the gloom.

The dark down there presented a logical problem. We'd left the living room lights on when we'd gone to bed. Of that I was sure. But then I thought Sammie or her parents had said something once about them being on a timer—not that night, no, but once before at some point when I had visited, so it made sense, sort of. I did not live there. I did not know things.

I descended the open staircase, whisper quiet. It bent twice, architecturally ambitious if not entirely functionally necessary. When I reached the bottom floor I listened again, looking down the hallway into the solarium on the west side. Nothing moved in the kitchen, of which I could see only an illuminated sliver two dozen steps away. The electric fireplace near me exuded the faintest red glow and gentlest ambient heat, turned down to almost nothing.

It could be, Iris Ricks wrote later, after weeks of studying the documents and evidence that accompanied the case, that Vidhor recognized the chance, in willingly becoming a living, breathing robot, to completely abandon the free will he found so oppressive and bewildering all his life. But more importantly, it gave him the chance to ascribe his darkest impulses to another being entirely, something pre-programmed, without control, and thus without guilt. In this way he could utterly give in to the homicidal rages which were more and more consuming him and resulted in the four deaths we know about.

As the frequency of the rages increased, he may have been looking for the ultimate escape from human guilt. He likely found the key after the surgery which rendered him partially artificial, when Samantha Cash first began speaking to him in her robot voice. These factors could have created a powerful connection, a powerful passageway, that had never existed for him before. And when the police came calling and he perhaps guessed that his only ally in the world had betrayed him to them, his last course was set.

When in the living room I felt a faint, unexplained draft on my face, I turned to the house's shadowy south side, and a few steps down the hallway toward the den brought into view the wide open window at the hallway's end.

George Vidhor was already inside the house, standing on a pricey wool carpet. Spotting me, he came forward slowly as I backed into the bigger, safer space of the living room. If I had explored the

kitchen beforehand, I might have spotted the old stolen minivan he'd patiently tracked Sammie in parked far down the curb in the no-man's-land between this house and the next.

Vidhor wore gray mechanic's overalls, and it was figured out later that he had shaved his head mostly bald in the days prior. Some object was blocking the lower part of his face; it was tied with a thin plastic strap tight over his mouth. It was a small square box made of tin or metal, with a thick mesh center. On both his right and left hip there appeared one green glowing circle, two small lights affixed to his belt, having almost the intensity of neon. The lights winked on, then winked out, came on and went out again, a pattern fed by a single 9-volt battery. In his right hand, Vidhor held a long thin object made stoutly of wood. Its butt end was pointed toward me, an iron stump tapering at a five-inch hooked blade. It was the heavy farming hoe he had beaten Dennis Thorpe to death with.

His eyes were gaping unnaturally wide as he moved toward me. He looked sick, dangerously emaciated. Now a single sound broke through the house as Vidhor lifted one foot absurdly high with weird slowness and then stamped it down hard on the carpet before him, then repeated the motion with the other one. Left foot, right foot, back and forth, tilting his torso forward not just for balance but in a crude simulation of a rusty two-legged machine just learning to walk, the weapon he held heavy and awkward enough to make the sequence more difficult.

It was several seconds before Vidhor appeared in the dim light of the living room. I had backed all the way to the base of the staircase, and as I reached behind me to touch the railing, I hollered out for Sammie as loud as I could.

Vidhor ended his forced march and stood straighter, carefully re-balancing himself. I could not see his mouth, but I heard him speak through the mesh set into that handmade prosthetic. The voice that came out was primitively amplified by another battery and single wire, echoing loudly in the cavernous room.

REVEAL FAULTY ROBOT QUEEN FOR CORRECTION, he said through the mask. The little green lights on each hip flickered and went out again. I heard the bedroom door open upstairs.

Why? I said to this man. I was gripping the handrail ferociously beside me, my eyes flitting left and right, looking for something to defend myself with.

Vidhor lifted his surgically repaired right leg arthritically and precariously, almost falling over, readjusting his grip on the farm hoe, whose heavy blade I could see better now. He brought his foot down hard on the wooden planks peeking between two sections of carpet.

HOSTILE ACTIONS DETECTED, the Georgebot told me. ERASURE REQUIRED.

Sammie was running down the stairs now, barefoot, in her sweatshirt and shorts. Vidhor craned his neck upwards with artificial effort. Every move he made seemed to be dictated by an internal discipline to be something other than what his birth biology dictated.

Sammie stopped at the last hook in the staircase. I could only see her through the gaps in the risers. She was holding something in her right hand, something she had secretly borrowed from her cat-sitter as she became paranoid about being followed. A .22 caliber Short, the smallest and weakest handgun she could find. She was frightened of them but couldn't stop herself. Unbeknownst to me, she had hidden it under the bed upstairs after dinner.

Vidhor did not suddenly charge and pursue either one of us. He had no intention of charging us, Iris Ricks would later write, because that kind of accelerated locomotion would not have been realistic in his new, fractured reality.

Sammie did something then I have never seen anyone do in real life or in any movie. Unable to keep her aim steady, she sank to her knees on the carpet of the wide square riser well above me, holding the gun in both hands now, outstretched, aiming at the intruder twenty feet away.

Seeing the barrel of the gun aimed at him, Vidhor finally lost his composure. He took the hoe in both hands now, lifting it higher, and he swung the butt end back behind his right side like an oversized baseball bat. He whipped it around in a wide arc in front of him, cutting the air with a hollow thud. A ceramic lamp on a tall skinny console table practically exploded under the force of direct contact and the table toppled over. Vidhor stepped over it.

Sammie pulled the trigger. There was a low-pitched crack and I saw the left shoulder of his overalls puff out. His body spun. There was a second of total silence as it seemed to dawn in his vacant eyes what had just happened. He let out a long, guttural, agonized and vocally distorted moan, then backed up two steps, almost against the bricks of the electric fireplace. His weight suddenly went out from under him and he sat down hard, bone-breakingly hard, on the ledge, silhouetted by the dim red light inside the hearth.

Practically hurling herself down the rest of the stairs, Sammie nearly tumbled beside me. I grabbed her free arm and shouted at her to run. Our car keys were upstairs, in the wrong direction.

We tore towards the front door. I couldn't see now if Vidhor's eyes were open or closed. He dropped his weapon and it clattered to the floorboards. His moaning continued, louder, still sounding like it was coming through an air traffic controller's microphone on a black box recording.

I slammed the front door behind us and we were outside in the pre-dawn. It sounded like Sammie was hyperventilating, but it was actually me. We ran past our cars but I had to stop and walk just halfway across the huge front lawn; I'd never make it to the curb at a gallop. Nothing inside my body was working right, especially my lungs. The bottoms of our feet slapped into the frost. My intention was to guide us to the right and make it to the next property where I'd seen two cars parked when I'd first arrived; surely someone would wake up inside. But Sammie had something else with her—the cheap no-contract phone her parents had forced her to buy, which she'd brought inside that night, feeling like she did need that sense of close contact to her parents. She'd grabbed it instinctively from the dresser the moment I had screamed for her.

Somehow we both stopped moving at the same time. Sammie's need to stop and make the call and my urge to look back coincided. Her connection to the 911 operator was bad enough to cause her to cry out in frustration and the phone was running out of power. But she got through a terrible stutter caused by fear and the biting cold and reported every key detail about our situation as we stared back at the front door. Help would be coming.

We had to get to the next house over. But the front door of the one we'd just fled from opened across the lawn the moment Sammie ended the call.

George Vidhor was sitting on the floor just inside her parents' foyer, slumped over and using the doorknob as a support to prop up his heavy bulk. He couldn't get up. For a moment we saw just his face in the shadows, and his right arm and his right hand grasping the doorknob.

He looked out at us, expressionless, helpless. He could not even speak at us now through his awful mask. A small sad green light pulsated from his right hip. That, I could see clearly. Sammie put her hand on my chest and pushed herself closer to me. And then Vidhor somehow found the strength to twist himself and defiantly slam the door shut again, closing himself inside.

The neighbors were already out and coming towards us, a husband and wife. She was a runner and a surfer, and where I failed to spot the signs that Sammie was about to collapse, she managed to get

her arms under Sammie's shoulders just as her eyes fluttered and closed and she started to sink to one knee. The woman struggled to lift her, but then she was carrying her away, her husband making sure Sammie's head was cradled. She reached out for my hand as her frozen feet left contact with the ground, and we all hurried together toward their door, which seemed so far away. But we made it. Suddenly there was warmth and stillness. I had lost hold of Sammie's hand at some point in the journey, but not for long.

When the first police personnel got to the mansion four minutes later, they understandably took the time to send officers all around the property to encircle it and work their way inward. I'm not sure how he was able to do it, but George Vidhor had gotten to his feet and staggered back through the living room and down the hallway he had originally come from. Likely in deep shock, he opened a side door, and leaving blood in slick splashes behind him, he walked out into the open air of the back acreage, where the pond was.

That's where they found him and cut him off. He was standing right at the edge of the pond, looking down at all that thin black ice. Barely conscious, with the last of his strength leaving him, he was about to walk right out onto its precarious surface. He didn't know what he was doing, surely. Maybe he didn't even know where or who he was anymore.

He turned. Five flashlights shone in his face simultaneously and shouts rained down on him, telling him not to move. He was unarmed. His green lights blinked on and off.

MACHINE POPULATION EXPANSION UNDERWAY, he announced to the police in his home-brewed electronic voice. HUMAN SUBMISSION ASSURED. And then they were on him, and then the Georgebot, weakened by several days without solid food, died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, and his human self died with him.

In the house belonging to the neighbors, the husband a Costco executive and his wife a computer network architect with Samsung, the immediate evaluation of me and Sammie could not begin until we were physically separated. Someone finally had to force us apart and ever so gently undo our clasped hands. We rode in the same precautionary ambulance to the hospital, asked to lie flat on gurneys. Sammie looked over at me at one point and I lifted my head and I nodded at her, again and again, as forcefully as I could. What I was trying to express to her in that moment, because no words would form through my river of tears, was that I wasn't going anywhere without her, ever. I would stay close to her forever. And so, in the worst hour of my life, I got to feel in one brief moment possessed by a primal ferocity of will, almost a savagery of the heart, that to this day I have never recaptured. And that radiant blaze of fleeting romantic courage was all, all of it, for Samantha Cash, the woman I'd met at the movies.

This week, Sammie sent me a New Year's card in the mail, and in it, she's done her best to answer the fragile question I had asked in my Christmas card to her. She remembers that on an early date, we'd theorized together that a good movie love story needed two things: It needed to make the audience see how these two people could be for one another what no one else could, and it needed to put them up against powerful obstacles to being together. *But I guess, Sammie writes, before the airfield, we never did really have either one of those elements... right?* I had once called us two prematurely tired millennials whose idea of a big Friday night was to rearrange our Netflix queues.

It was nice and unspectacular and easy, and I don't think either one of us had the emotional energy to look around for anything more.

So in her card, Sammie agrees it makes sense that we just ran out of connection. She remembers feeling that in the terminal as we said *So long* and kissed just before she got on board the plane. That sort of felt like the end of our real story to her somehow, right there. It was the terrible things *after* the airfield after that added the dimension which fooled us into thinking we had something that was unbreakable, worthy of a script. She doesn't know whether that's ironic or cruel or just the way of the world. *All I know, she writes, is that I think I'm finally gonna beat the dark clouds, I really do. Eventually remembering everything didn't make them any stronger.*

And now, maybe she's right, maybe we have gotten the dice to roll just so, so that we've both been given another real chance with someone. It seems the way I wrote about Vicki to her in my card, just a two-line mention, tells Sammie, who knows me well, that I've become a slightly different person with a more hopeful vision of life. And she feels very good about Max and where they're going, a year and a half in. *God knows I'm still hurt and untrusting, she writes... but she doesn't feel tired.*

She ends her card by asking me if I've seen the new Wes Anderson. She and her folks and Matty Snider streamed it through three separate devices through a VR app that made it feel like they were all in a theater together. Matty couldn't stop laughing. *It's pretty good, Sammie writes, and sends her undying fondness.*

rink

My name is Walter Fratello. In this story there's just me, Ike, and Lenny, just three of us, three guys from Gillick Lake. We went to Europe all at the same time and we came home from Europe within six months of each other. It was thirteen people from Fairlis County in all that got drafted. One was killed in Anzio, one in Colmar Pocket. The three of us got through without a scratch, relatively speaking. The paper did one of those stories about us before we went: good friends going off to war. Then we were forgotten. That's fine. The G.I. bill sent Ike to engineering school, it got Lenny the money to start his landscaping business, and a month out of the service I went right back to work for my father, who died in 1955.

The three of us got together sometimes after the war, but now we were men I guess, and the process of being adults slowly pulled us apart. Still, there were good times at the rink in Steamville, where Coach Blake was still training up terrified sophomores. Whenever he saw us, he still called us the Three Bandits, and he swore it was the referees who cost us the county title in '39, not us getting creamed on the boards by St. Helen—whose worst player back then was probably better than even Ike. But hey, no bitterness. We played Pinochle at Dex's Pub sometimes, talked about women. We never once talked about leaving Gillick Lake. I guess some people think that's strange, but you know, we loved it there. Where else would we wanna go?

We didn't talk about the war nearly as much as you'd think. A few times during Europe we wrote to each other, and Lenny managed to come see me in the hospital before I got rotated, and *that* was when the war talk had come, the things we saw. In the middle of it all the words came out, when we were trying to cling to being human, to living, trying to make sense of it all. The silence after we got home, though, I really felt it. I think they did too. Those years had eaten up something deep in us, but when we were together, it was just random anecdotes, the level of stuff you'd read in *Reader's Digest* in the 'Humor in Uniform' column, frankly. We were... avoiding.

What we had instead of traumatic battlefield stuff was guilt. Lenny had been a merchant seaman in the Med. I'd mostly been a signalman second class on a troop transport endlessly crossing the sea, back and forth. Ike had the most ground time; he was infantry for five months before a broken clavicle from falling cement while he was on patrol rotated him to London, and some random brigadier general spotted that he was smart enough to contribute in other ways. Ike fired his rifle ten or twelve times in combat. I'd fired mine twice. None of us had killed or wounded anyone. Lenny was the most in danger, really. His boats were targeted pretty often, and he was on a Liberty ship once that took a direct hit, he was in the ocean for six hours.

It was definitely a different thing, not having stories for the people back home of risky charges or rushing pillboxes or landing somewhere under heavy fire. I did help carry a wounded soldier once to a house where a French family nearly didn't let us in. This little kid hurled cherries at us from a window. The soldier's name was Sidney. He'd stepped on a mine and half his foot was gone, and when he saw that he went gray and started naming all the saints he knew. I never knew that had any salvation use, just naming the saints.

If Larry Rose hadn't been killed in Algiers, maybe it would have been different. All three of us knew him from school, and that kind of followed us home. What no one in town ever really knew is that we didn't like him in school. He was kind of a weird, secretive kid, almost no friends. The kind of kid that once you graduate, maybe you see him around town sometimes but you never even nod to acknowledge that yeah, you used to be classmates. But after he died, the three of us agreed it was a lousy thing, and because of the Gillick High connection we all kind of got fastened together in everyone's minds. So one day six months after we'd all gotten back we were eating subs at Patrick O'Smasher's and Lenny, who was an absolute terror on the ice but a gentle giant off it, said, *You know, we should go to his house and say something to his folks.* And we did. He and I and Ike went over there and we knocked and his mother let us in and we sat and we talked about Larry like we'd all really liked him. And I think it did make his mother happy, that one day.

It was Larry's father who sort of chilled me a little, because he'd been in the Great War. In fact, I think he was the most decorated veteran of the first world war in the county. Lafayette Flying Corps. He asked us about our service, very specifically where we'd fought. Really kept at it, asked us lots of questions. Mrs. Rose tried to get him off it even. And it felt like as soon as he realized none of us had seen the kind of action Larry had been shipped right into, he got cold. So cold I got uncomfortable, and we left soon after. I mean, he shook our hands on the way out, he thanked us for coming, but we'd struck a bad chord with him. I could imagine him that night lying in his dark bedroom, his only son gone, thinking, *Who were these boys to talk about my Larry? What did they leave over there?*

That's just the way the war had gone for us. Lenny told me once the biggest fight he really had was people's suspicions of him as someone born to Japanese parents. He dealt with that at sea almost every day. Told me sometimes he was glad they'd never lived to see the war start. And this was after the nonsense he'd had to take about it at school. He was the only one of us who signed up voluntarily. He wanted to fight.

I couldn't aim for a guy's head, Ike told me once when it was just him and me fishing at Crump Lake. I aimed low, he said. Didn't even put any thought into it, it just took me over. I thought there'd be more guys like me, but no one ever talked about it. I missed anyway, I know it. I didn't say anything to that. The two times I'd fired, it was pretty much into smoke. Couldn't see much of anything at all. Then I got sick, like almost-the-end sick, from a hepatitis vaccine they gave us, and I got shipped to a different universe really.

We went to the town events when we were asked, put on our uniforms, the whole thing, like we were supposed to, but we just wanted to go to Dex's right after, or the rink, and move on. *If this is gonna be two, three times a year for our whole lives...* Ike said once when the three of us were kind of drunk, and then he just trailed off, shaking his head. I didn't like going to those ceremonies because thoughts would go suddenly through my head, thoughts that were too much for me to process. They scared me sometimes, but mostly they were just overwhelming. On the fourth of July they projected a huge photograph of Arlington National Cemetery on the side of the bandstand in the park, and I had the thought, looking at those rows of graves: It wasn't that they had wanted me to die—it was that they had wanted me to kill.

It was bad enough we'd never really be the same after the war; I never heard of anyone who was. It did not feel good to be reminded that we'd come out of it all not just unwounded but unable to honestly say: *Yeah, before the smoke cleared that morning, we gave them much worse than we took.* Who'd have thought those words were something we would ever secretly want to speak? But we did. The three bandits.

One day in November of 1946, I had to drive some veneer logs all the way up past McLair and I got real lost coming back because of a washout detour set up after the snow. I was alone driving down a windy thing called Bluebell Road, far north of Gullport. Beautiful crisp day. And the call of nature came, and I wasn't in a great position to hold out for a general store or a diner, so I turned off onto a dirt road that was nicely frozen over and killed the engine just as the road began to snake through the woods. And after walking a little ways for privacy and finishing my business, I saw through the trees to my right the most inspiring sight an old jock like me can see. You know, when you grow up obsessed with sports, you instantly judge every open acre by its possibilities for baseball or football or what have you. Well, the one I spied through the trees was something really special. I left my truck where it was and weaved on foot through them for a hundred yards or so.

There was a pond in this middle of nowhere, a nice big pond shaped like the bottom part of a guitar more or less, and its surface was the most pristine natural hockey rink I had ever seen. I'd been playing on Gillick Lake and Little Bug all my life, and let me tell you, pond hockey is not easy. Every twig, every rock, every leaf stuck in the ice offers up another bump to destroy your ankle. There are so many flaws in the surface, you're almost better off putting on a pair of boots instead of your skates, you'll be faster that way. Skating on an open pond is an exercise in aggravation unless you all spend a half hour smoothing the area, and even then, you're always one bad turn away from twisting your leg into a pretzel. And as for using an actual regulation puck, forget it—it's too unstable, a baseball is the better way to go. But this pond was almost without flaw, like someone had gone to work on it with a belt sander when no one was around.

And really, no one was around. I didn't see any No Trespassing signs or indicators of who the property belonged to. The area northwest of Gullport was just farms and unspoiled open land, so I thought there was a good chance this was just a natural gift from God that I absolutely had to tell

Ike and Lenny about. There was a convenient ring of grass all around the pond, twenty feet wide sometimes, sometimes just five feet or so, the grass buried now under four inches of snow. Beyond that encirclement of grass, the bare woods crowded in on all sides.

With our jobs and such, it was a few weeks before we could make the trip out there happen. I couldn't wait. We were going to make a full morning of it, bring beer and sandwiches. We could all use the exercise. Ike and I were working too much to really keep fit, and Lenny had been getting steadily heavier even before he'd gotten back from the Med. Maybe there was something psychological going on there, I don't know, but it didn't stop Ike from commenting cheerfully to Lenny that soon he'd stop being feared as the enforcer on the ice he used to be and start having to squat in goal and let guys just run into his stomach.

You know, my father won't even go out there, Ike said to me when I stopped by his apartment on Tower Road. The comment was kind of out of context; Ike had his head underneath his faulty sink, rooting around with a screwdriver, so I had to ask him what he meant. The way I'd described my route to the pond, it sounded to him like it was somewhere on the edge of the Lyra Forest. Ike's dad—he was a truck driver, and a real stern man—wouldn't go hunting out that way apparently, had refused to for years. He was scared to. I laughed. I was always ready for another story of the elder Davis's paranoia.

He's afraid of the warlocks, Ike said. The old man's uncle had told him long ago that the Lyra Forest was full of them from pre-history times. They would float around at night and draw big squares in the ground with sticks, and reality stopped inside the squares till someone rubbed the boundaries away. The warlocks got away with all manner of insanity that way, apparently, inside the squares, really dark stuff.

Ike's old man believed in all that. Believed in the warlocks. Believed in flying saucers and sea monsters too. But at some point years before, he'd been out north of Gullport in the woods with some buddies late at night and they'd heard some sounds or whatnot and they'd cleared out and he never went back. My parents' generation got a lot of weird talk from *their* parents about the Lyra Forest, who knows why. It was one of those places. Almost every small town imagines there's some faraway spot on the map where it's not safe to go.

I saw Larry Rose's mom at the supermarket on the way back home. You saw everyone in town a couple times a year in Gillick Lake. She was alone. She was getting a drink of water from the fountain outside before she went in. That's all. She never saw me. Just bent over the fountain to give herself a little water, something to make the moment a little better, then continued her life, doing all the things she needed to do. Her son was just a half mile away, in Old Township Cemetery, and always would be.

November 19th, we drove to the pond. It was first light when I pulled up at Lenny's house and he came out with his stick and a Thermos, grinning in an evil way because he was skipping out on work. Told the foreman he'd just hired that he was sick. We picked Ike up, and then we got immediately aggravated because Mitch Baschnagel, our fourth, a schoolteacher Ike had gotten to know from Dex's, only came as far as the door in his robe. Said he didn't realize his kids needed to be at his ex-wife's that day, blah blah blah, so he couldn't come, which left us with uneven sides. Harsh. We cursed his forty-year-old self. He seemed impossibly old to us, and we swore up and down that we would never become like *that*. I swear he was afraid he was going to have to ride in the open back of the truck, and that's partially why he bailed on us.

We hit the diner in Fairlis Bend. I'm really tempted to list everything we ordered, because I know how much we used to eat for breakfast before hockey sounds impossible to normal people, but I'll refrain. Two and a half years of army rations, remember. We would have got to Gullport by nine, but now the detour had been removed and I took Twelve Mile Road to the area instead, which actually caused us a different delay.

We were gassing up at an Esso. It was Lenny who pointed out something around the side of the building, something built in a little square lot where the snow was untouched; there were still a couple of inches on the ground from a good fall a few days before. Three big jagged stones as tall as we were, lined up beside each other. There were plaques embedded in each one.

I started to tell Lenny that we shouldn't be wasting too much more time with the weather so uncertain, but he'd already walked over there to check it out. Ike seemed to sense that he should too, because he got out of the truck and followed. I didn't have a choice then.

It was a memorial to two nurses who'd lived in the area, both killed in Antwerp, and one infantryman, killed at Tarawa. Someone had planted Queen of the Prairie around the stones but it was well past its bloom. It might have become a nice little place eventually, that lot, just not then, right beside the gas station, an ugly ditch running right past.

We all read the plaques silently. Then we were back piled in the front seat of the truck and talking about the Red Wings. Strange how I never once thought about what kind of flowers were around those stones until it came back to me just a few hours ago, when I sat down to summon every memory I could, so I could write this story.

The fellas were sufficiently wowed by my discovery, although we had to sweat out finding the spot; the way still got confusing. I left the truck a little deeper in the woods this time, and we hiked through the trees with our hockey sticks slung over our shoulders, crunching through the snow. Lenny and Ike carried the goal net. That thing weighed more than an M1, I swear.

The ice on the pond showed wavy traces of the most recent dusting, but aside from that, nothing had really changed. Ike whistled and asked where this thing had been all his life. Lenny got his skates on first and rushed out right away onto the brilliant surface of that pond. Living where we'd lived all our lives, you got to be an expert about what ice was safe and what wasn't more or less just by looking at it, and Lenny took that chance right away. He streaked across the entire length as fast as he could, demonstrating its near-flawlessness.

We got our gloves on quick before starting to play. The sun was staying stubborn behind the clouds and it couldn't have been more than ten degrees Fahrenheit. Ike had these convoluted rules about how to play with just three guys; we'd used them before at the rink in town, but Lenny and I both thought Ike had taken things too far in his super-mathy brain, so for a while we just knocked the puck around doing drills. We didn't shoot much because missing on an open pond meant leaving the ice a lot and retrieving it from the snow, but it felt good to thwack a slapshot right off the post and knock the goal over once in a while. That was when you knew your velocity was nice and strong, when you could knock that thing over.

So we did station passing for a while, and sometimes Lenny would hang around goal and challenge his reflexes in a 2-on-1 drill. I swear, it was no less grand than when we were twelve, back when I had to be convinced by Ike that hockey was the thing I needed to do, not baseball, even though baseball had the cards, the trading cards. There were no good hockey cards back then. Only once

did I hit a rough spot on the ice where some leaves had muddled the surface, and a nice suggestion of pain shot through my foot, and I resolved to slow down a little and be more aware of the bumps and the ridges. You have to work your feet and your ankles out a little before you hit pond ice, you really do, to get them ready for the abuse, and if we stayed out there longer than a couple of hours, there was going to be hell to pay the next day.

We'd just stopped for a bit to christen the first beer of the morn when we saw someone coming through the woods from the south. I heard Ike cuss and we figured Ahhhh, the jig is up, it *is* private property, we're gonna get the boot, here we go. Three men it was, but even before we could make out their faces we saw that each of them was carrying a hockey stick. I looked at Lenny wide-eyed and he looked at me the same way. *Bingo!*

They were a little backwoods-looking, these guys, as they stepped out onto the ice and walked forward. About the same age as us, mid-twenties. Two kind of looked like brothers—stocky, sort of curly-haired, balding already. The third was definitely not related. He probably would have qualified as the tallest person in Gillick Lake. Must have been six-foot-five, six-foot-six, and he wore these strange round tinted spectacles, real small, like he was oversensitive to the light or something. One of the shorter two asked us if we were up for a game, and we said sure, absolutely. They even had their skates with them, hidden away in little knapsacks. We assumed they lived nearby, maybe even owned the property, and like us they were ready to skate at a moment's notice.

There were introductions, very crude I guess is the word, no chit chat. I remember their names, I certainly do. Brett, Cullen, and the tall one with the spectacles was Larsen. We shook hands but they were not terribly interested in that, you could tell. Just meaningless ceremony. We set a couple of quick ground rules, nothing out of the ordinary. We'd swap offense and defense, fifteen minutes each. We'd use Lenny's watch and just stop when we thought we were getting close and check. Pretty standard stuff. I was excited to play. What a stroke of luck to be able to square off like this with a minimum of fuss. It was tough enough to get sides going at Steamville. Brett, Cullen, and Larsen headed to the far bank to get their skates on and have a quick nip from a flask they passed around, and then they came right back.

We were on offense first. *Don't give me Larsen, don't give me Larsen*, I thought, just because the guy's height was so intimidating, and I didn't like that I couldn't see his eyes, what a great psych-out. But of course he covered me for the most part while keeping a good eye on Lenny. And we saw right away that these guys were good, very good. Not the best skaters, but fast with the stick-work, really sharp reflexes. Everything I tried to get past Larsen, he was ahead of, and me and Lenny and Ike had to resort fast to creating a little chaos, trying some riskier passes and feints, stuff only Ike was really good at. The one named Brett had this bright yellow scarf that seemed kind of out of place because it was so impossibly clean and shiny. He breathed real heavy. When he got close you could hear it, kind of a dog sound. It was tough to keep your breath that day, out there in that kind of cold.

We were more than halfway into our offense time before we even got a decent shot off. I sensed that Cullen hated protecting the goal. He wanted to be out in the thick of it, so he'd skate out real far to intimidate, leaving a lot of open nets, but every time I thought I had my shot, Larsen would close in or his stick would flash out and break my rhythm. It was going to be maddening just to keep up with these guys.

They played rough, too, from the beginning. Their kind of heavy contact felt out of place in three-on-three pond hockey. *Maybe it's different out here*, I thought. Without a ref, we didn't want to come on heavy with the crying foul, but these boys were all about hitting, something else we had to get used to fast. They would time their hits right at the arrival of the puck, and they had a habit of

jumping the gun. Only once did Larsen mutter *My fault* after he took me down, but he didn't even help me back to my feet, another faux pas where we came from. Brett kept high-sticking Lenny but Lenny didn't say anything about it, even when the guy got him on the elbow once, pretty egregious.

Both Larsen and Cullen converged on me when I had my best shot opportunity yet because of a terrific centering flick from Ike, and I knew I was a dead man. They both hit me, and I whiffed the shot and the puck sputtered across the imaginary back line and Ike finally cried foul. Our opponents looked at us like, *What's the problem?* as I stood up again. We didn't demand a penalty shot, but Ike, who definitely had his limits on the ice and in life, said in a not terribly friendly way that next time we'd ask for a two-minute power play added to our offense time. *Just a solid hit, man*, Cullen said and skated back to the goalpost to sip one of the beers we'd offered him. He'd barely thanked us. It was kind of mockery, the way he balanced the bottle on the edge of the post like he was confident the goal net would never get shaken enough with him there to knock it over.

We switched. Them offense, us defense, Lenny protecting goal, Ike on Larsen, me doing a zone thing till I could get a handle on what Brett and Cullen could do. It was a lot. They scored on us within two minutes. Larsen nailed a wrist shot after deking me. Lenny beat his stick into the ice in frustration.

After that, we seemed to agree psychically that we had to play a little rough too. *Create chaos*, that's what Coach Blake had always told us. *Only the pros have the ability to handle chaos*. So I began to lunge in moments when it wasn't expected and give Larsen a little stick action on the ankles, and Ike just plain attacked the puck when Brett tried to streak past him once, really took a gamble that worked... and if he happened to give Brett a late bump in doing it, oh well. At one point when I should have cleared the puck in the middle of a swirl of bodies and been done with it, Lenny and Ike and I first had a little puck swap to tease our opponents a little. That kind of loose passing nearly cost us, but it felt good to maybe make them think we were a little nuts.

Toward the end of their offense time, when they'd already scored three goals, they took things up a notch. Larsen took an errant pass from Cullen and beautifully skated off-balance to the net, where he released the puck right toward the gap between Lenny's feet. The shot somehow missed, went off the post, but Larsen did not miss Lenny. He raised both arms and hit Lenny right in the chest. Lenny's head connected with the ice when he went down; I thought for a second I could hear it.

Foul! Ike called. *Two minutes, man!* Larsen gave him a quizzical, innocent look. *He was in my way*, he said blankly, a statement that meant absolutely nothing. *Too hard, way too hard!* I added, and there was an ugly silence as we all looked at each other. Brett stood at the far edge of the playing zone, and I could hear his animal breathing that far away.

We're not giving anybody two minutes for love taps, he announced coldly. *Just swap. You're on offense*. Maybe that was an acceptable trade by the rules, but it was meant as an insult. Whatever good feeling we'd had a half hour before had faded. We were tired, out of breath, and now it felt like we had something to prove, and whatever else that particular feeling gave us, it took all the fun away.

Then the glasses thing happened. We mixed it up pretty good with these punks in the first few minutes of our second possession, relying on Ike's pure speed for him to get some space and praying my passes were on target. It was working. We tied it up on one of Lenny's patented all-or-nothing slapshots that always either scored or sent the puck deep into the cheap seats. Even then, he was hit late by Cullen and he lost his balance, went down hard on his elbow. That made Lenny finally utter the first open insult of the day: something casual, just a warning shot across the bow, as it were, a statement that we weren't there for their amusement.

Larsen snagged the puck away from me effortlessly the next time I touched it, and he peevishly slapped it so hard it was guaranteed to make us go chase it. In that split second when I heard the crack of his stick against the puck, I had already thrown my shoulder into his, allegedly as a last-ditch grab to block his motion. I got him so squarely, his dark spectacles popped off his head and landed on the ice. While Lenny skated slowly out to retrieve the puck, Larsen stared me down like I had just slapped his mother. *Sorry*, I muttered, and skated away. Larsen bent down, picked up the specs, and covered his beady eyes again. Jesus, did he look mean—but smart too, smarter than his two teammates by a mile. Without his specs, he looked like a clever assassin in a movie hired to kill a foreign president. With them, he just looked cruel.

After that, all three of them turned real bad. It was that contact that did it, I swear. Brett's stick was always high now, Cullen's every hit was late. No more courteous clearing of the puck, ever; it was knocked away at full strength sometimes, and I tried to use that dead time to calm myself down. *Every time you do that, we're adding thirty seconds*, I called out over my shoulder the second time it happened, but to that there was no reply. Larsen withdrew and left it to Brett to stay with me, that breathing getting more and more ragged as we all got more tired. Just before we switched to defense again for the last time, Lenny stumbled on a seam in the ice we thought wasn't going to be a problem and fell as he pivoted. Brett kicked the puck away, laughing. *Have a nice trip?* he said. I was done with this right then, and I was about to call time and announce we had to be leaving.

We were that close to it all being just another day ruined by guys who grew up not being able to handle losing. But I felt Ike's hand on my shoulder right then, with strange timing. He gave it one quick squeeze like he was saying, *Just one more round. Let them get their offense in.*

Try as they might, they couldn't score that tying goal. Lenny got tighter and tighter on the net, and this irritated Cullen to the point where he threatened to put him in there permanently if he didn't come out and play what he called 'real hockey.' When Larsen and Brett exchanged some hand signal, Ike looked at me and nodded. I'd seen it. They had some secret game-winning maneuver. Everyone always thought they had one. This version turned out to be a behind-the-back pass that Ike broke up with a well-timed lunge, but his feet got tangled with Brett's and they both fell.

Larsen, ten feet away, decided to retaliate. As he skated past me he pushed out just enough to catch me off balance and send me down as well. I landed on my right hand and there was a flash of dull pain. It felt like the string of a bass guitar had been strummed in there. Lenny cried foul and I got up, flexing my hand.

Game over, I said. *Enjoy your beers.*

We've got like five minutes left, Cullen said, pulling up way too close to me, getting in my face.

Guess we forfeit, I said. *Congratulations.*

I can't really recount the ugly talk that came then with any accuracy, because some of us started talking over each other. At one point Cullen stuck a finger in my face and I turned my back and skated away as Ike took my place. The talk didn't last long. The upshot was that, according to the three wise men there, we were losers, didn't know the first thing about hockey, didn't understand the difference between playing dirty and playing hard. We all separated and went in two directions. I realized then, at the same time Lenny did, that part of Ike's face was smeared with blood. I told him to stop right where he was. He'd cut himself pretty badly in that last fall, but it could have been worse. He didn't pay it much mind. He just wanted to get off the ice.

I heard Lenny call something out across the pond to those three scumbags. He was asking Brett to repeat something he'd just said while I'd been fussing over Ike's injury. We'd missed it. But I could

tell from the expression on Lenny's face, an expression I'd seen before, that he'd gotten slurred. Brett, who definitely looked like the kind of guy who was into that kind of thing, didn't respond to the challenge.

Cullen and Larsen had reached the far side of the pond and were getting their boots back on. Then, I couldn't believe it—Brett, he of the yellow scarf, who was lagging well behind them, turned and threw his stick as hard as he could, end over end, onto the ice in our direction. It skittered and smacked against the back of Lenny's leg harmlessly. He could have just taken it, but he didn't. We stood for a second, stunned by how futile but how hostile a gesture that was. Finally Brett turned and skated off, grinning, his middle finger in the air. Far away, Cullen laughed.

Ike hauled the net away by himself. Without a word, we got our boots back on, intentionally not looking across the pond. Ike finished off the last part of his beer, which he'd left crooked neatly in the snow. I was the only one to turn back just before we headed into the trees. Our opponents were sitting comfortably on the far side of the ice, still resting. Larsen sipped from the flask.

Ike pressed snow onto his cut to make sure the bleeding had stopped while Lenny and I carried the net, which of course seemed heavier now. It caught on a root one time and we dropped it and Lenny hurled a profane insult at it like he might to a human being. We traversed the woods soon enough and we hoisted the net into the back of the truck and piled back into the front seat. Backed down the icy dirt road, and started the drive home.

Our silence continued on the ride, Ike beside me, Lenny squished a bit on the end. There just wasn't much to say. No conversation about how to salvage the day. It didn't seem salvageable. I turned the radio on. Sammy Kaye sang 'The Old Lamp-Lighter' as we drove, peaceful white fields on both sides of us. My hands stung from the cold despite my gloves and my nose was virtually numb. The guys stared out at the landscape, banged up and morose. Ike stopped giving his cut attention and let the blood trickle a little, not interested in it anymore. Lenny wrapped his scarf around his right hand and cinched it there for a while.

There was a bar and grill sitting beside a body shop off 122, and I pulled into the parking lot without consulting them. Food and then back to bed for a couple of hours: that seemed like the ticket. There were no objections. Only after sitting in the truck for twenty minutes had our aches gotten the chance to settle in, and none of us made it to the door at quite a normal pace.

We took a corner booth. The bartender came over and gave us three slips of paper on which someone had typed what they had to offer for lunch. Told us to just circle what we wanted and bring it back up to the bar. He asked if he could bring us three beers and Ike nodded. We stared at the menus and I picked up a stubby little pencil and circled the word *hamburger* and a couple of things I wanted on it, then I passed the pencil to Lenny. An old couple in the corner of the place put a coin into the jukebox and here came 'Personality,' the version sung by Johnny Mercer and The Pied Pipers, not Dorothy Lamour's rendition from *Road to Utopia*.

The guys gave me their menus and I took them up to the bar and handed them off. The bartender didn't even look at them, just walked them back to the kitchen. Not the friendliest of men.

Behind the bar, over a colorful rank of liquor bottles, was an arrangement of photographs, all in frames. I saw the bartender in several of the photos. He was in uniform in a few, three or four years younger. Near a bottle of vodka, he'd hung a simple portrait shot of himself in front of a dark background, very clean-cut, inspection-ready, a smile on his face, a smile he didn't have for us.

The photo my eye went to and stayed with before I turned back to my friends showed him outdoors, standing beside an impossibly frail-looking civilian, both of them looking toward the camera as if

they'd just realized it was there. Other civilians like this one, in similarly dire physical condition, wearing papery clothing, were milling around in the background among Allied soldiers. Some sat and smoked or drank from tin cups. There were no smiles here. The handwritten caption read: MAUTHAUSEN, MAY 1945.

Our food was brought out and we ate. Did we say anything, at all? It didn't seem like it. Maybe Ike or Lenny made a comment about the weather. It was looking to go bad out there, the clouds were promising problems.

Bing Crosby sang 'I Can't Begin to Tell You' on the jukebox, Carmen Cavallaro on the piano—though I am partial to the way Sammy Kaye did the song a year later.

We didn't linger very long in that place. We hauled our tired bodies up and shuffled back out to the truck. A grim blast of wind hit me as I opened the driver's side door.

I started the engine. Beside me, Ike closed his eyes and tilted his head back. I pulled out again onto 122 and turned right.

The landscape began to roll past us again. Even three miles in, neither Ike nor Lenny, who were both watching the road just like me, made any comment about our direction. A couple of the barns we'd passed before turned up again: the one that looked burned out, and the one with the Old Gold Tobacco ad on the side. The wind was now blowing snow across the road in serpentine sheets and I kept the wipers on for when it really kicked up.

I had to turn the headlights on for the last few miles back to the pond. I followed my own tire tracks back into the woods and killed the engine. Ike and Lenny got out on their side, I got out on mine.

We reached into the back for our sticks, but this time we did not take the net. We left that where it was.

We marched through the snow, bending our path this way and that to keep on track. We were at the pond again in no time at all. Lenny was flexing his hands against the cold already. We must have lost another ten degrees in one hour. The sky was a merciless gray.

Larsen, Cullen and Brett came out of the woods on the other side of the pond almost as soon we walked out onto the ice. The three of them had their skates draped over their shoulders as they came. They dropped them into the snow at the pond's edge and went about the business of putting them on. Each man had brought his stick, of course.

To stave off the iron claw of the wind, Brett had double-wrapped his yellow scarf and brought it almost all the way up to his eyes. He dropped his puck onto the ice idly, just kind of kicked it ahead of him as he skated lazily forward in a long loping S. So much snow had blown over the ice that ghostly shapes formed and re-formed constantly on the surface, swirling around us, then breaking up again.

Brett kicked the puck toward Lenny, who stopped it with his right foot. He set his stick down on the ice when we were all facing each other near the center of the pond. I drifted to his left, Ike glided to the right. Lenny sent the puck towards me. Larsen blitzed forward, and the moment I touched it, he brazenly barreled his left shoulder into me. With those tinted spectacles on, the landscape must have looked very dark to him now, very dark.

Ike took two great strides towards us and brought his stick high, gripping it tight on both ends and lunging at Larsen's back. The giant tripped right over me upon contact. In response to this, Cullen swooped in, but Lenny met him and got his stick real low, going right for his feet. Cullen got tangled

but somehow kept his balance, the blades of his skates going *tak! tak!* and causing chips of ice to dislodge. The puck trickled away from us all and came to a stop somewhere.

Larsen was back on his feet already, unsteady. Still, he had enough strength to whip his stick around and try to catch Ike in the waist as he approached. Ike dodged. I was calculating my next move when I took a shot to the face and went down. My head hit the ice and stars exploded in my field of vision. A bitter laugh escaped my lips, involuntary, not quite sane.

In the five seconds between my falling and trying to get up again, true chaos broke out. I saw Ike on his knees, trying to get up, and Larsen kneeing him in the side to get him to stay down. Lenny had grabbed Cullen's jacket at the neck and was slinging him around like a discus thrower, hurling him down. Cullen rolled and got right back up and swung his stick sideways. Lenny's eyes went wide and he cried out in pain as he took the wood directly on his hipbone.

Then I was up, my head throbbing. The wind was sweeping through the trees and snow was lifted in great vanishing blankets torn apart in mid-air. One enshrouded me, delicate as a spiderweb, as I skated back into the fray.

Brett was coming at me, but he pulled up in defense when he saw I was already getting back to strength. He held his stick pointed out in front of him, gripped tight in both hands like a fencer, calculating. I swung mine, trying to knock his away. He took the advantage and tried to take my head off. I heard the savage whoop of the wood rip past my left ear. The bottom of his stick grazed across the back of my neck, bruising it. I heard Ike hollering nearby and caught a glimpse of his face. His chin had gone totally red, having been slashed. Blood spilled onto the ice.

Lenny got away from Cullen and tackled Brett, pinning him to the surface of the ice. Lenny's gloveless hands, chapped and near-frostbitten, went around Brett's neck. I had no time to react to it. Larsen had swung his stick into the side of Ike's head. The flat end got him in the ear. I had to help him.

My blow went into Larsen's stomach and his glasses flew off one last time. I drove the butt end of my stick into his jaw. I heard a cracking sound even over the wind and he staggered backwards, teeth tumbling out of his mouth. Then I went for his gut again, whipping the stick around so hard I nearly toppled. I got every inch of him and he fell to his knees, then over entirely.

I turned. Cullen was skating away. It was like he was trying to disappear into one of the snow phantoms that grew, shuddered, and faded with every gust around us. Lenny got to him first. He took his legs out, and when Cullen rolled over, looking up at us with genuine fear in his dumb rabbit eyes, he tried to shield his face from our blows. Lenny knelt down and drove a fist into that stupid face.

I remember a snow phantom shifting direction in mid-air and crashing into me, filling my vision with glittering fireflies when it broke apart, and then Lenny wailing to my left—not in pain, but in a scary exclamation of victory of a kind as someone begged him to stop, please stop. I remember seeing Larsen's entire body skimming the ice like a thrown doll. He was face down and his head wobbled as his chin hit bump after bump, the flesh there torn open, but who had thrown him so hard into that helpless slide was not known to me. He stopped sliding close to my feet, and I raised my stick and brought it down. I remember looking up at the sky and seeing a mammoth dark cloud above that was silently splitting, separating into two, riven by a growing jagged cadet gray line of sky. I had lost my knit cap and my hair was soaked. Cullen's face floated past me, gleaming with hatred, his nose mashed to a pulp. One of his ears had been cleaved partially off his skull. *Who let him up?* I thought, and skated in on him.

He was trying to get to Brett, but Brett could be of no help to him now. My last strike probably rendered Cullen unconscious before his knees hit the ice, then his chest and head as he toppled forward with no resistance. I ran over Larsen's spectacles on my return to where people were still upright and limbs were still being moved in both aggression and self-defense. Larsen himself was all but for. He was staggering in no certain direction, one arm held up uselessly to the sky. His jacket had hiked up and I saw blade cuts criss-crossing the skin of his lower back. Then he took a last stick blow to the chest, dead-center, and he stopped moving altogether.

I felt myself being pulled backward at the waist, and when I spun to confront my assailant, it was Ike. He was pulling me away. Somehow he had both my stick and his in his free hand. I'd lost it somewhere. I'd been susceptible. Lenny was simply standing on the ice and staring, looking dazed. Thick and steady snow fell on our shoulders. There had been a time jump. I understand concussions can cause such things.

We were leaving the ice. *Don't look*, Ike was saying to me, his face very close to mine. He wouldn't let me turn around. One of his eyes seemed to have been permanently sealed over. Lenny skated up behind me and laid a gentle hand on my shoulder to guide me. We drifted in a broken mass to the far edge of the ice.

My teeth were chattering. I had never been so cold. My hearing went in and out and I missed something Lenny was saying to me. He said it again and I read his lips: *Keep moving*, he was saying.

The process of shedding our skates and getting our boots back on was done without even sitting down, fast and clumsy. Ike was saying *Come on, come on*, and then he had plunged into the trees. The snow was so heavy I had to keep my eyes on my friends' backs to navigate. But that snow was comforting too, I will say. I had never seen the color of fresh blood contrast with pure new snowfall. Looking down at the droplets on the powder, there was a very primitive beauty to it.

We did stop to look back just before we lost the sight of the pond altogether. The three bodies lay closer to the edge of the pond than I would have thought, at the far end. As if they had been trying to get off it, trying in vain to reach that border, and they had all failed. All of them face up. I wondered if their mouths were open, if they were taking the snow like it was communion. The amount of blood on the ice was sort of fascinating, just in a scientific sort of way. The snow would likely cover it up in less than twenty minutes. And if it kept up, the bodies themselves would be mere humps, like gingerbread men, in a couple of hours.

Our ruined sticks were thrown into the back of the truck. Mine had split neatly up the center. Ike took over the driving. My head was full of gravel and nails, and Lenny couldn't put any weight on his right foot. He had hobbled all the way back to the passenger's side door. The headlights threw weak yellow circles ahead of us and we pulled out not long before we would have lost enough traction to get out of there at all. The clock on the dashboard made no sense to me. It claimed it was only a little after 1 p.m.

Ike lit up a cigarette and stared at the road ahead, focusing admirably on every subtle and skillful turn of the wheel, keeping us steady and on the path and not sliding across it. Reaching the main road was a small victory in itself, and after the turn, which caused us to fishtail ever so slightly, we could safely get up to about twenty miles per hour.

Lenny leaned forward beside me very suddenly and pounded his fists on the dash and laughed crazily, his eyes gaping like a madman's, spit flying from his mouth. *The three bandits!* he cried, his teeth grinding. The blood vessels in his left eye had broken from violent contact back on the ice, turning that once-white mass a solid red so that he looked demonic. *Surrender or die!* he yelled,

throat horse. He remained leaning way forward, staring out at the silent storm, like he himself had frozen. No cars came in the other direction.

Someone crossed the road on foot way up ahead, moving out of the dense acreage of trees on one side fast and moving toward the other, east to west, maneuvering through the snow with strange ease. Someone out there in the middle of nowhere. We were at least a mile from the pond. They plunged into the forest near a yellow sign that marked a sharp upcoming curvature in the pavement, and we lost sight of them. Him. Her. It. I can only say they had a head and body and legs.

I drifted away then, letting go of consciousness. Ike remained sharp and determined to get us home, and that is just what he did. When I eventually woke up, he was lying on my ratty sofa, still fully dressed just like me, and it was Monday, 6:04 a.m., and our bodies were crying out for help we were horribly slow to give them.

What was the exact point that day when you first thought it all wasn't real, do you remember? I asked Ike the year before he moved away from Gillick Lake, to Maryland, to be closer to his kids. It broke his heart, to move away, but that was what he felt he had to do. 1959, that was.

I guess, he told me, when I saw those guys were basically already there that second time. It didn't make sense they'd be there, so ready. That was when I started having those thoughts.

All three of us were calm when we drove back to Bluebell Road together a day and a half after the combat. Not nervous, not frantically discussing our terror of being arrested. I knew for sure there was nothing more to fear when I saw that the name on that road sign was not in fact Bluebell Road. It was called Bluecoat Road. The letters could not have been more clear, though I had seen them differently several times, on both the way in and the way out. And Bluecoat is how it appears on maps today.

Through the woods we had trudged one more time, having the leave the truck quite far away because of the snow accumulation. Our injuries were *very* true. For starters, the area all around Ike's right eye was a deep midnight blue, and Lenny's limp was going to last for weeks.

The surface of the pond had been well blanketed, but there were clearly no bodies hidden under that snow. We stood and looked for a moment, appreciating the serenity of the spot, its natural beauty. We were holding landscaping picks that Lenny's new business owned. They would have hacked holes into the ice pretty easily, just in case there were bodies to be sunk into that shallow water.

We turned, went home, and a month later, as we expected, it had become obvious no one had ever found anything out there, and never would. And if I had thought the silence among the three of us about our time at war was thick, the pond *really* vanished into our interior vaults, and it stayed there for a very long time.

Was there anything else but shock, when you realized they were dead? I asked Lenny once in 1957, sitting in Dex's Pub, three whiskeys into the night. He was living just two blocks away from me then, and still does today. *You mean... pride? Was there pride?* he asked me. He was really starting to

struggle with his weight then, and still does, and I worry about him a lot, and I try to keep him away from diners. But with kids in both our lives, we don't see each other all that often.

Pride is pretty much the word I mean, I think, I said to him, and he thought about it for a long time, and then he slowly nodded. Yeah, I remember the way he had looked when he pounded his fists on the dashboard of the truck, and I had almost joined him. But that feeling had more or less vanished by the time I'd woken up on the floor of my apartment. It felt to Lenny like the suspension of truth began with the first moment of assault from Larsen that second time around. *I saw the sky when he hit you*, Lenny told me, *and that sky didn't look anything like it ever had. Nothing looked right. So I just... let myself go.*

Lenny believes that if we were to dig around just a little, we would find three guys who are now in their forties living out past Gullport, and if someone were to really jog their memories, they'd remember a rough day of hockey with three strangers who weren't any good, who couldn't take a little contact and had left after forty-five minutes or so. They'd remember all going back home then and picking up their little lives. They'd be completely out of shape today, probably, and drinking would have taken at least one of them down, but they'd be around the county somewhere. And yeah, this notion of Lenny's kind of makes sense to me, too.

As for me, I think reality didn't fully return until just after I saw that strange person run across Rural Route 10, just barely grazed by the truck's headlights in the gloom and the heavy snowfall. No one should have been out there, not that far out, not in that weather. And not without a coat. Something about that person's movement was not quite natural. They were across that road and then back into the trees too fast, like they weren't even using their legs to move. I have told only my oldest daughter that I would testify they were gliding over the snow. But no one has ever asked that I pledge the truth about that day to them.

It's called the Lyra Forest, but I've never found any history of the area that explains how it got that name. It's still a place colored by people's superstitions and tall tales, pervading through the generations. The Lyra Forest story Ike's crazy father told him is the one I'll always remember most, naturally. It's been two decades since the pond, which itself seems to have no name and no history. I've never been back there. I always turn around before I get that far.

Today, I'm just sitting here in my little house, trying to remember everything about my kills, and what the thought of them did to me in the decades after. In trying to understand that, I've put my thoughts on paper and read them again and again, and looked at maps and checked my facts and even revisited the memorial beside that gas station we stopped at, and the bar and grill still owned and tended by Sergeant Mickey Rankling of the 11th Armored Division, talking to him for a half hour about whether he'll ever sell the place. And though I will never tell my children this, the answer to the very private question, *What did my kills do to me?* is that while I took no pride in them, I did feel, on that day and for months after, finally fed. I know that same word applies to Ike and Lenny too. But we do not speak about it. I hope you will understand we are still human.

Tomorrow is Sunday, a day of rest. I'm going to church as usual, where I usually add a little prayer for peace in Vietnam to my thoughts about my family and friends, and then I'm going fishing, to the south, on Lake Lancer. Lenny will be working on his car, I think. It's having transmission problems. And somewhere in the woods around Bluecoat Road, I think maybe plans will be hatched and squares drawn in preparation for the nighttime's mischievous games.

sideswipe

My name is Father Leo Moss. It had already been one of the most difficult days of my life when the accident happened. I was driving home at about one in the morning from a bar—a bar where I would not have been save for my distress over a conversation I'd had six hours earlier. Bishop Caine had called me over to Rossi Street unexpectedly for a talk. She courteously and carefully laid out my options for transfer to a parish in either Missoula or Denver. She plied me with many compliments and thanks for my work in Boise, but she explained that the distraction, the *murmur* unfortunately caused by the investigation into my alleged inappropriate financial conduct with a member of my congregation had been judged great enough by the Right Reverend Thomas to warrant a sort of 'disinfection' of the situation, as the bishop put it. *I believe in you*, she said, and shook my hand firmly, and gave me some papers to take home and examine. And I thought, with some measure of guilt: *If you believe in me, then the facts should make a difference.*

But the facts had not, and would not, make a difference. I saw that clearly. No one was willing to look deep enough or ask questions uncomfortable enough to bring to light everything that should have been. And so, after signing those papers alone in the vicarage, I slunk off to a bar called Reggie's Roost out on Route 21 south of the city, and I stewed in my anger. Just two beers for me, mind you. I sat alone near the empty karaoke platform and tried to look at it all through the lens of a test—yes, one more test in a life of them, and I would pass this one the same way I had passed the others: with my love of God to arm me, that love which for me is the single truth that can't be corrupted by rough seas or redefined according to changing times and attitudes. Since I was an adolescent made almost dizzy sometimes by the infinite possibilities of that truth, I had followed it, steadfast.

But on that night, I allowed myself to simply hate a little. To distract myself from my situation, I played darts with the foreman of a furniture warehouse, and I got into a discussion about movie musicals with two elderly women who marveled that someone so young even knew who Gene Kelly was. When I left the bar to drive the sixteen miles home, I was sober and rational, just a little worried about the flurries that were falling.

It happened near Lucky Peak, where 21 starts to twist and turn all the way northeast to Stanley. I stopped briefly at one of 21's very few blinking red lights and took the opportunity to wave the car behind me around. It had been tailgating me for the past three miles and I was thoroughly fed up. After a pause, it began to maneuver to the left of me; instead of using the shoulder to squeak by, the driver used the oncoming lane.

As soon as that car started to pull past me, something huge came out of the dark into the glare of my headlights. I heard it tear the underbrush before I saw it: an animal body moving at great speed out of the woods to my right. Never in my life had a thing that size rushed toward me like that, and though I was safe in the car I cried aloud, twisting the wheel to the left and putting enough pressure on the gas to lurch forward to avert contact.

The animal was a fully mature elk, head low. In an instant it made a mockery of all the tepid two-dimensional videos I had seen of them in the wild, its enormity and power driving mute terror into me. I heard its hooves clack on the pavement and saw its eyes glittering in the high beams, and then there was a soft scraping sound as my car connected with the one beside me, which had slammed

on its brakes and never cleared me. The elk grazed its front bumper, just enough to set the car, a tan Mercedes, rocking gently. The panicked beast galloped into the woods on the other side of the road, plowing into the brush. Its antlers must have risen four feet off its head. One bare instant of its unfiltered size and power making a physical threat, and then... gone. I had finally encountered the reality of the wild on whose domesticated edges I had lived for three years.

Realizing I had scraped the Mercedes in my panic, I couldn't stop myself from releasing a burst of profanity. I gave myself a moment to collect myself, then shut off my engine and stepped out onto the cold, silent road.

The other car rested beside and just a few feet ahead of mine. It bore clear marks on the passenger's side door where I'd dinged it, meaning an inevitable and expensive repair job. The driver already had his window rolled down. It was a man in his late thirties maybe, dark red hair, clean-shaven and professional-looking. He didn't move as I approached him. I asked him if he was all right, and he gave me only a distracted half-nod.

I craned my head to check out his front bumper, which seemed unmarked and secure. When I gave him this piece of silver lining, I again received only the slightest positive acknowledgement. He looked like a man trying to work through a complex geometry problem in his head, refusing to let me or anything else distract him. I told him I supposed we should exchange insurance information, and turned to go back to my car to get it. The quicker the better—though the flurries had stopped, it was getting uncomfortably cold.

In response to my statement, he finally turned his head to me and made apathetic eye contact. Though he was well-dressed in a casual way, he looked pallid and weary.

I have no interest in that, he told me quietly.

I had to have him repeat that odd sentence. So he did, with the exact same tone and inflection, a lifeless carbon copy. I said I believed it was the law, but this seemed to go right through him. His eyes lifted to my clerical collar; I was still wearing it under my old jacket with the Nashotah House Seminary logo on it. He asked me if I was a priest, but then had no verbal follow-up to my affirmative reply. Nothing, only silence.

Finally he opened the driver's side door and stepped out onto the road. He didn't immediately examine the damage to his car as I expected, though. Didn't look at it at all, in fact. Instead he first took in the horizon over the mountains, walking a little ways toward them, and then he stared down at the road mournfully. The blinking red light over our heads could be heard clicking when it went on and off every few seconds. It was not even a proper intersection, only a place where vehicles could turn left toward an industrial access path whose gate was now locked tight. At this hour, the enforced stop seemed infuriatingly without purpose, except maybe to calm speeders on this long stretch that invited raucous driving.

The man asked me where we were, and I told him. It came to me for the first time that he might be drunk, but his steps were perfectly steady on the pavement. His Mercedes had Wyoming plates. Rather than pursue his history, I merely suggested we could be on our way and out of the cold if we just swapped our info now.

Why did you feel the need to turn the wheel and lurch like that? he asked me.

I was taken aback. I told him it was just instinct. *You thought you could create that much space*, he said—not angrily, no, but I saw a disturbing amount of hostility in his expression. This was a man interested in picking a fight.

So I softened my own tone even more, offering that yes, I guessed there wasn't much point, in hindsight. But this would not suffice for him. *I'm not hearing an apology*, he said. The left half of his face became bathed in red light under the alternating electric current, and then it went dark again, over and over.

This was it, I realized; this was road rage. The quiet kind maybe, but still worrisome, chilling. This was encountering the wrong man at the wrong time. I stammered something about how the elk had come out of nowhere, I hadn't had time to process, it looked enormous, I did what had simply come to me. Even in the middle of these feeble sentences, I felt my own mood turning darker. I was getting angry at this provocation.

So in your mind, said the man, squeezing his eyes shut as if my ineptitude was giving him a headache, *you did nothing wrong*.

A pickup truck approached the spot from the direction we had both come, moving at a troublingly high speed; and just barely slowing, it blew right through the light and kept going. Maybe we didn't look terribly distressed, this man and I. Almost like two guys conferring about directions. Still, the callousness of the person in that truck was distressing. It sped away without a care.

I made my final plea to the man that this was all a matter for the insurance people to suss out, hoping he would finally let me go. He asked me again if I was a priest, and where. I told him. Again, he seemed not to know just what to do with this information. He mused upon it. He'd been getting steadily closer, then he caused me a panicked moment when he took a long, sudden step towards me. But he was only trying to get past me to finally examine the accident damage.

He crouched before the door. There was a single long smear of maroon paint from my Camry below the handle. He laid the tip of his index finger with strange gentleness on the smear, tracing its entire length.

I was doing my best to collect myself and remind myself of who I had always tried to be. I asked him where he was going. He emerged from his reverie and straightened again.

Just away, he said. *My wife has... changed. She needs help but... nothing works*.

My wife has changed. Not *My wife is sick*, or *My wife left me*. He could have meant anything. Shivering a little, I made what I thought was a delicate and tactful inquiry as to the nature of the help he was looking for, but he cut me off mid-sentence.

Doesn't this just sum it up, he said. *Not even a priest will listen to facts*. As I stared at him, mute with confusion, he added that this seemed like the perfect night for our paths to cross, because now, with just a few sentences between us, he could cross *everyone* off the list, absolutely everyone.

Whatever positive will I had been trying to summon was leaving me. I couldn't help it. I was getting genuinely mad. I inquired reluctantly as to what facts he was talking about. He explained to me, with the tone of someone speaking to a child, that the insurance company was definitely going to side with me because he had moved into the oncoming lane, even though *I* had waved him around. *That* was the incontrovertible truth—as they would see it.

I waved you around, I said, *because you were tailgating me*.

So in your version, he said, *I intimidated you, is that right? I put myself in that place*.

He was moving closer to me again. It was about that moment when I stopped being Father Leo and was nothing more than Leo Moss, who had once been suspended from high school for coming up

behind my eleventh grade bully and knocking him to the floor of the hallway outside the library with one hard punch to the spine.

I began to explain to this man that if he had followed at the right distance, what the guidelines generally were, I would not have waved him around, and besides, he should have used the shoulder anyway for safety, because, as he *seemed* to agree, the road bent and the curve ahead was almost blind. He took real exception to this last bit, nothing how unusually bright the sky was that night, with visibility ahead actually being quite good considering the hour, quite good. Of course, headlights actually made that a moot point, but still, he wanted to challenge my loose choice of words: blind curve, *blind* curve, another example of me not dealing in *fact*.

The fact is, he said, your turn, your little gambit, was random and unwarranted.

He was just three feet away from me now, one hand pressed to the hood of his car. Though I found myself wanting to win this somehow, wanting to cut him with just the right word or bit of infallible logic, I backed down. *You need to learn to control your impulses*, Mr. Andewall had lectured me after my suspension, and I have never forgotten either the cruelty or the essential wisdom of that phrase.

I pulled my wallet out and from it I took, with a shaky hand, one of my contact cards. I took my own step forward and pressed it firmly on the hood of the Mercedes and backed away, pronouncing the argument pointless because of the existence of accident reports. He was welcome to claim whatever he liked.

If he wasn't quick in picking that card up, the breeze was going to blow it away. Yet he didn't. He barely glanced at it. And sure enough, it soon tumbled onto the road. The man reiterated to me that he was done with all of this, though what 'this' meant remained unclear. This was the end of the road for him.

There was a hollowness and stoniness to the statement that frightened me. He told me that when he had seen my collar, he'd thought maybe, just maybe, it was a sign. He wasn't looking for salvation or anything; he only thought I might listen to the facts others that had dismissed. But he was clearly wrong.

That when things turned just a little. Eleven years in the priesthood had begun to educate me about what someone sounded like when they were clinging to their very last thread. Most people don't know how to honestly express that, so it gets cloaked in hostility, accusations, circular reasoning. I asked him to please tell me what it was that was disturbing him, what it was exactly that was troubling him, *what* about his wife..? And I know I suddenly sounded like some movie priest, but it was what it was.

We both heard a low, muffled scraping sound from nearby, quite close, very quick. The man turned his head idly toward it. Its origin wasn't clear. It could have been some unseen small animal crossing paths with stray broken glass on the pavement, or even a mechanical component settling awkwardly inside the man's engine, or mine, because of the cold. My contact card skittered a little further away on the pavement, flopping face down. By morning it too would be deep in the woods.

Thirteen months now of doctors and lunatics on the internet, said the man. He informed me he'd bought a gun the week before, and had held it dozens of times at home before finally getting in the car and starting to just drive for days in an attempt to escape its possibilities. *But you know*, he said with a weird pained smile, *my anger seems to be going more... outward now*. To demonstrate, he thrust his arms out in my direction in one clean snap as if pushing something away, and he laughed at this odd image he had created, the most cynical laugh one can imagine.

I made one last attempt to get him to back up and explain it all to me so it made sense. But he would not let go of the belief that it was me who was keeping us from dealing in facts. *The truth is*, he said, *this was your fault. Tell me it was your fault, tell me that so I know it's in your heart, and then I can talk to you.*

Something bad was going to happen, physically, I thought, if I didn't fold with some very convincing playacting right then. A physical altercation was ground I was terrified to trod. So I did fold, acknowledging with a slight stammer that maybe he was right—I wasn't that great a driver, I didn't have much experience with sudden events on the road... he knew how it was, right, you develop this muscle memory...

No, no! he interrupted. *That gets us farther away. I've been placated until my head explodes, it's got to come from your heart, don't you understand?!*

His eyes were getting wide. He wasn't drunk. He was, I believe, going mad. Whatever it was, I thought it was something outside of himself, some unstoppable force bringing him fear and stress and locked doors with no way out.

But I had to self-preserve, that above all things. I'd come close to being victim to madness once before; almost every priest or counselor or first responder has had that very rare brush. I'd been told by an elder that the sad but critical strategy was to say anything that would maneuver you past it to safety.

I apologized gently, in a softer voice, for whatever he was going through, and for any way I might have made it worse. I gave him my full name, and again the name of the parish, and told him I could be contacted there, either about the accident or anything else. I backed away a little faster than was polite and went around my car's front end toward the door, breathing hard. I opened it and got in, hoping the abrupt finality of my movement would leave him with no way to extend the scene.

And it seemed like it had worked. He moved toward his door too. Opened it. Got in. He stared through his windshield blankly as I started my engine. This seemed to cue him to start his too. We were moving on; it was over. Let it get ugly later, from a distance, that was just fine. There'd be plenty of room and time to chastise myself over my weakness, my heartlessness later at home.

Now, though, just as I was twisting the wheel away from his car and putting mine into drive, he hit a button and his passenger's side window was rolling down. He tilted his chin upward in a gesture suggesting he had something more for me to hear. God help me, I rolled my window down in response, feeling overly safe, one foot hesitating on the brake, knowing I could be out of there in a heartbeat if need be.

Tell me one thing, he called to me across the narrow distance between our cars. *What is your definition of tailgating?*

I said, *What?* He lifted a hand to the ceiling of the car and cued his dome light. A weak white glow fell upon his haggard face.

Let's see if we can agree on this one thing, he said. But no. I told him we had talked this out long enough.

Define it, he said insistently, and added that if we could achieve this one common point of fact, he would tell me everything. And whether what overcame me was the residual anger over my unjust transfer out of my parish or simply the sense that he had tricked me and had never intended to quite let me go, I almost openly sneered at this poor man, fueled by an immature need to take a controlled but icy parting shot.

You were following close enough to make me uncomfortable, I said. It was dangerous.

You didn't think it was dangerous, he replied quickly. That's what everyone claims. You were just irritated. Admit it.

I said nothing.

I have no common point with anyone anymore, he told me finally. And then he smiled once again.

See how you like this, you liar, he said, and his left hand, which had dropped from the dome light out of sight on his left side, emerged again as I heard the sound of his trunk unlatching and popping open. It lifted smoothly on its hinges with the kind of neat engineering efficiency I'd never be able to afford. I craned my head to look, alarmed.

Something large began to crawl out of the trunk, some bulky dark mass eager to emerge. As it did so the man stepped hard on the gas and the Mercedes leapt forward, causing the living cargo to tumble out all at once onto the road. The tires left long streaks on the pavement as the car revved away, headlights remaining off.

The red glare of the taillights lit the thing on the pavement only for an instant. I saw a dark body with long hairy arms and short legs and a head much too large for its shoulders. It pushed itself up from its awkward landing and tried to stand fully erect, but the construction of its body was so crude and disjointed that it could achieve only a hunched, precarious balance.

It came right for me in frantic pursuit, half-hopping, half-shambling toward my window. I hit the gas pedal but my wheel remained turned dramatically to my right and my car sprang almost directly at the shoulder. I hit the brakes before I lost control entirely, and then the shambling thing was on me. It slammed into the side of the car clumsily and its head protruded through the window, which had remained rolled up only halfway after my final exchange with the disturbed stranger.

A dripping canine mouth spewing hot breath was opening and closing like a machine inches away from my face. I felt a wet furry snout brush my cheek and angry snarls washed over me; the creature was furious to be thwarted by the pane of glass keeping it from full entry. Two big misshapen eyes showed nothing but white, like protruding bulbs of garlic. It was the arms that destroyed any notion that this was fully a wolf indigenous to the area—they were long and angular and one bloated paw was able to grasp the base of the wipers as I hit the gas again to try to shake the beast off. The long hairy fingers protruding from the other paw clamped over my window glass. The head shook back and forth crazily as it fought for every inch of penetration into the vehicle.

I had to beat the animal off with both hands to survive the attack, desperately grabbing at the wheel only in strobe bursts of attempted control. The car wove almost randomly. Contrary to what seemed possible, the animal was managing to push itself further in, its stumpy legs only touching the pavement when it was possible to gain leverage. Its jaws snapped, missing my throat by an inch, and I slammed hard on the brakes one last time before we drove off the road into the trees. I ducked while thrusting my left hand outwards into my attacker's snout, twice, but I was only risking the loss of my fingers. In the scuffle, my entire hand arced directly through that canine mouth and came out slick.

I lunged for the passenger's side door, grabbing the handle with my right hand and hauling myself toward it. The car was drifting ever forward so the beast had to struggle with its balance, barely keeping it from full propulsion into the car. I scrambled into a prone position on my back and kicked at it. Its shoulders were fully inside now.

The animal's head ripped the fabric on the underside of the roof as it came. Its teeth got hold of one of my shoes and it yanked its head left and right in a blender-blur of motion, its dumb white eyes gazing at I don't know what. I pulled my foot back hard and lost the shoe to its mad thrashings. It struck the steering wheel and fell out of sight. I realized as I got the door open that my attacker had become wedged hard in the window gap, so eager to rip me apart that it had lost its sense of space entirely and could manage neither to get any further into the car or pull itself out. That was what saved me.

I pushed myself out the door and went shoulder-first onto the road, the car slowly moving on. Its collision course with the trees was inevitable, though it was going to happen in slow motion. I saw the beast's body hanging out the window, temporarily stuck. The legs were so underdeveloped compared to those deviant arms that the awkward locomotion I had seen it struggle with made perfect sense. I heard it panting and start to emit uncanny shrieks as it panicked against its self-made trap.

I shrugged off the stab of pain in my shoulder where I'd connected with the pavement, got to my feet, and started running for the opposite side of the road. I only heard the thump as the Camry made rough contact with the shallow ditch and continued just a few yards till it hit a thin tree.

Just beyond the strip of wild grass that lined Route 21 on my right, the woods began, and I plunged into them, instinctively going towards concealment rather than taking my chances on the open road where even if someone came along quickly, the sight of a running man waving for help might just as well send them past me faster. I'd been dimly aware that the land sloped downward from the highway, and somehow this made me think I could move fast.

The bareness of the trees and the unexpected brightness of the sky gave me good visibility as I ran, weaving, leaves crunching below me. Just half a minute in, already winded, I found that the slope was more pronounced than I had thought, and I began to feel the weight of my body creating a dangerous momentum, panic obliterating the good sense to slow down. The terrain kept arcing more and more dramatically. I reached out with my right arm to begin to use fleeting touches of the skinny trees all around me to regain some control, but then I heard a volley of barking rise far behind me. The beast was coming.

The trees broke cleanly up ahead of me, but finally the slope won. All it took was hitting a patch where the leaves had bunched up enough to deny me any traction at all. Having become too top-heavy, I felt myself start to tumble sideways and I went down on my ribs on my left side. A great gout of dry air erupted from my chest as I was thrown into an uncontrolled roll that mercifully steered clear of the remaining trees. I saw a dark kaleidoscope of fractured images of my surroundings, swirls of dark wood and sky with the silvery coin of the moon ricocheting through them. Then, as if God himself had dragged me upward by the back of the neck, my momentum pushed me uncertainly back onto my feet and still facing forward.

In front of me was an open field that briefly cleaved the forest in two. My ribs throbbing and my lungs burning, I ran. The wolf, no closer, no farther away, began to bellow unceasingly. As it did so, other sounds rose. There was the scattering of leaves, the snapping of branches, and a heavy thumping on the ground that began to flow towards me like an invisible river, something that could not be outrun.

The first of the elk rushed past me on my left, a thousand pounds of imposing muscle in full stride, fleeing an unseen pursuer. I never even saw the second one of the group until its antlers struck my left hand as it passed me, breaking bone. I screamed, and utterly spent, I could only shamble along at jogging speed, gripping my agonized wrist, waiting to be struck a final time. One elk hooked

sharply to the right to get out of my way before it would have crushed me. Grunting wetly, it barely grazed my side but its bulk was enough to make me stumble and collapse into the dead grass. Convinced by the noise of the hooves all around me that the stampede was going to kill me if I didn't keep moving, I rolled and tried to make it back onto my feet. An elk went right over me then, leaping cleanly before I could fully rise. It landed awkwardly, its legs buckling, but then regained its speed. I'd become nothing more than a stumbling, comical rag doll when the one behind it grazed my right leg and I fell to the ground one more time.

There was a yelping sound from the treeline I had emerged from. I finally looked back as the last of the elk galloped past me. One of them, too slow in escaping the woods, was collapsing in a dusty cloud fifty yards behind. The wolf-thing was taking it down. Its rosy arms were wrapped around its neck and it seemed to be burrowing its head into its prey.

I remained on my knees, shivering with pain, watching the end of the attack, trying to regain whatever breath I could. As soon as the elk no longer presented a threat, incapacitated but still alive, the wolf let it go and looked towards me across the field.

It rose and continued to chase its original target. Before I turned to run, I saw how it struggled so to achieve a fluid motion, as if unable to make sense of its own skeleton. It looked like a stop-motion monster in a crudely made B-movie. All it could really do effectively was snarl and grab and bite, and it was clear that I could run as fast as it could if my lungs would support me. But I swear, I *swear* that its legs had somehow grown longer than when I first saw them.

The elk had scattered in all directions across the field. Past it, another vast patch of trees began. Sharp stitches dug into my side to go with the throbbing in my left hand, which I held up before me as I ran into this new darkness. I could hear myself breathing like a sputtering boat engine about to give out. I blundered past fallen timber struck down by wind or lightning; felt my forehead torn by a low-hanging branch I never saw coming; splashed through a puddle of cold standing water whose breadth I woefully misjudged, soaking my shoeless right foot. I had only half as much stamina as before my first fall. Yet when I chanced a look behind me, I sensed that I had put a considerable distance between myself and the wolf.

And then, deliverance. The woods broke a final time into terrain that stunned me with its abrupt familiarity. I was on another road, but this one represented the outer edge of a quiet rural neighborhood. It was barely a hundred-yard run to three small working-class houses nestled in the trees, old repair-starved things lining a lightless street that hadn't been repaved in a long time, The weight of many snows had turned it into a ragged derelict.

An old man was walking from an ancient stretch Cadillac parked on stones toward his front door, holding a cheap convenience store grocery bag. I ran towards him, holding my right hand high, trying to keep calm and not terrify him. I believe I botched my approach and first contact considerably, unable to stop myself when I finally did reach him from immediately emphasizing the size of the wolf that was pursuing me, and even clumsily describing aspects of its troubling anatomy.

The man was likely in his eighties, visibly frail. He responded just as I'd hoped, with an urging to follow him quickly into the house, where we'd look out and see what we could see. My eyes did not leave the murky treeline beyond the road as we moved with more slowness than I thought I could bear. Only when the old man got out his keys and put them into the lock did I feel I was somewhat out of danger.

The closing of the door behind us brought such an oppressive blanket of warmth that I briefly saw spots in front of my eyes. His little living room was tidy and tastefully lit. Bookcases took up two whole walls, and original framed art seemed to fill up all the other available display space.

He set his bag down in his tiny bachelor's kitchen and urged me to continue to talk, to tell him everything. I only skimmed my encounter with the stranger and spoke in a rush of being pinned down in my car by a creature that was unlike anything I'd ever seen. He was horrified by my escape across the field and the injury to my hand.

I was lucky to find this man. He continued to respond kindly and helpfully and courteously, offering me a wet rag to dab away the blood on my forehead. As I called the police on his cell phone, he looked out the kitchen window, watching the night attentively, distracted only for a moment when he got me a bottle of water out of his refrigerator. After I delivered another wild monologue into the phone, helpless to curb my trauma, the police dispatcher asked if I needed an ambulance. Looking down at my left hand, I judged overconfidently that the swelling and the worst of the pain had stopped, and it could wait until I went to the hospital under my own power. I wanted more than anything to get back to my car somehow.

The old man urged me to sit in his most comfortable chair in the living room until the police arrived, and to take off my soaked sock. I waved away an offer to wrap my hand in a towel. I thanked him profusely, starting to become ashamed I had broken down so, was so utterly like an eight-year-old spilling out a story well shy of coherence. He had read a lot of things in his time, he told me, and he had learned there were truly strange things in the world. He did like to read. He asked me to describe the wolf in ever more detail, clearly fascinated, and I tried my best.

We both got up to venture out onto the front step, me hanging back cautiously in the doorway. I wouldn't let the man go more than three long paces outside. He would have been utterly unable to defend myself.

Still there was no sign of the beast out there in the dark. The only sound was the wind sifting gently through the trees and blowing dead leaves across the road. He told me he saw elk walking through the neighborhood all the time. One stuck its snout right in his mailbox to get at some cookies once.

We went back inside, to our chairs, safe and warm behind the latching of the door. The old man leaned forward to poke at the glowing cinders in his fireplace, and I found myself entranced by them. The hint of glowing warmth from the hearth felt so good on my bare right foot.

Did you notice that moon tonight? he asked me. *A doozy.* I said that I had only been grateful it was so bright tonight; otherwise I might have become deeply confused in the woods and in the field and never made it out.

He fiddled with the iron poker, looking contemplatively past me out the living room window. *Funny how the full moon became a scary thing because of the movies,* he said, and I agreed. But he thought there was more to it.

We like to think of the moon when it's simple and bright and lovely, he reflected. *It's a pleasant artistic abstraction. But the fact is, when it's full like that, you start to see all those rough contours, and it looks a little like a skull. You feel the cold bleak reality of a desolate mass in space. That's why I think the full moon became a little frightening.*

I don't know if I see it that way, I said.

It had been almost fifteen minutes since my phone call to the police. I wondered aloud what was taking so long.

The old man said gently that he wasn't sure what I'd told them had come out in a way they'd respond to quickly. He added it wasn't my fault; I was still likely in shock and not quite able to communicate how I normally would. I'd maybe used a few extreme adjectives that might give them pause. They may have thought they were dealing with someone with a tall imagination, and would until they discovered my car and maybe tangible traces of the wolf. Not that the police weren't coming—he was sure they were. Just maybe... not at top speed.

He was right. It was starting to sink in that the jumble of words and images I'd given them over the phone was likely more chaotic, more sensational than I'd even first thought. *But that's their job*, I said to my host, *to trust what we say. Right?*

I don't know if they see it that way, he said with a sad smile.

We kept talking by the hearth, about the deep woods and creatures that eluded understanding, and at precisely 1:45 we heard the crash outside, way down the road. When we hurried out into the front yard, we saw sporadic silent snaps of electric blue light against the tree line. There, unprepared people who hadn't listened properly to facts had met with a force totally indifferent to them: a once-complex soul whose awful new existence held only considerations of hunger, pursuit, and violence.

But my new friend and I, we... *we* were ready.

endgame

My name is Duncan Ruggle. The night in question began when I sat down at my little desk in my little room at about six o'clock and called my good friend Stony. *Hey man, it's Duncan!* Very cheerful was I. He was surprised to hear from me, all right. I tried to put his mind at ease, put all the usual pleasantries out there, and just when it started to sound like he wasn't afraid of me, I gave him the pitch. I told him about the opportunity.

One night only, this very night. An unexpected chance never to be repeated. The Cigoletti House. The Cigoletti House! How many times had we talked about going to the Cigoletti House at night, at night! And now, now through a set of circumstances I didn't want to explain just yet, I had not only been given access, but I was going in with a professional, certified ghost hunter. When I think about how Stony's imagination must have lit up at the sound of that, and when I think about his voice as it sounded over the phone, like a little kid forgetting all his troubles because Christmas had come four months early, I feel bad for him, I do. I feel sad for him. But only for a second.

He wasn't sure about going. He wanted a lot of details, but I was dedicated to teasing them out. I played the nostalgia card, I played the fear-of-missing-out card. How could the most devoted

student of the paranormal that Seven Bells had ever seen, Stony Russell, turn this chance down? All he had to do was meet me at the house in a few hours and all his curiosities would be satisfied. Twenty-six years of living ten miles from the Cigoletti House, and now we had a ghost hunter. How many people ever got to even meet one? And everything paid for! No trespassing worries even, it was all legal! Sort of.

I just about had him, just about, when he got real quiet, and he said, *Hey man... I don't know really what you heard about what went down with me and the police, but there's people who think I wasn't straight with them. The cops kind of put words in my mouth, it was really bad.*

And I said *No, no, no no no no, not at all, water under the bridge!* At no time, I assured him, had I ever thought he had *anything* to do with Misty's disappearance. Yes, he had been one of the last people to ever speak to her, yes, there had been conflicting statements, but Stony, Stony, no, no, no, it's all fine, it's all good. The only reason I hadn't called him sooner to hang out like we used to was because, well, with everything that happened I hadn't much felt like talking to anyone. What a horrible clown show it had all been, and my sister gone... but now was the time to set all that aside, because we, *hey*, we were going, him, and me, to the Cigoletti House, who would believe it? He wasn't really going to even *think* about not going, right? And he had to admit, it sounded very cool. Sweat was pouring down my face as I hung up the phone.

I called this guy Orson back and confirmed it was all on. I was committed and ready to do what he wanted me to do. 8:30 to half past midnight, just like we'd discussed on email. He'd found out there was good Verizon coverage in the Cigoletti House, and yes, I was definitely on Verizon. The woman Orson had told me about, his girlfriend, had already sent me some paperwork. I'd gone to Staples the day before and printed it out. It looked convincing enough to keep me from getting picked up for trespassing, but Orson was willing to pay for any fine. He would call me ten minutes before the live stream started to make sure I was there and my signal was good, and after that he'd call me back and I'd be on the stream.

I did ask him what happened to the first guy, the first guy who'd agreed to do what I had just agreed to do, and Orson told me that he'd actually gotten scared, just the day before. He'd driven past the house and he'd gotten a bad vibe. Bowed out. So it had fallen into my lap.

Thank you, Stony. Because you see, it was Stony, the town's local expert on all things spooky, who first recommended I listen to Orson's show, back when Stony and I hung out quite a bit actually. And two years later, bam! The upcoming Cigoletti House episode was announced. Stony was not one of life's great participators, so he did not apply. I, however, saw my chance.

Seven Bells is a hurting town. Of course I don't want to live here. But those are the breaks. The walk from my room to the Cigoletti House gives you the very best route to see all the worst of what's here. Normally you wouldn't go through the Slabs to get down to Pound Street but I had time, even after the time it took to get my stuff into my backpack and wrapped up in a clever way. The Slabs used to be where the old medium security prison was until the sixties when they tore it down. But they left the cement foundations for almost everything, never cleared all that out. So it's been cement and weeds and litter for a whole mile ever since. Stony and I used to play cap guns there. You'll see drug needles there in the weeds if you look, and graffiti is everywhere. As I walked through the dark, I saw a new piece: Someone had painted **NORTHSIDE WHORES SHOULD ROT ON**

a slab in big purple letters. At least the grass was still kind of pretty at night. I liked the way the streetlights hit it.

After the Slabs you're in Thomas Jefferson Village. I walked past Mike's Dreamland Café, which is just a convenience store and sub shop where we used to go after school sometimes for potato chips and Snapple, all gated up at night. Thomas Jefferson Village is a good place to see abandoned houses. Lots of people who used to work for the freezer factory lived there. I saw no one as I drifted through. It was 7:15, and it was cold.

After the Village is Cloverluck, and the Cigoletti House. 35 Pound Street. The house on its left is abandoned and half-covered in ivy. The house on its right... well, it isn't even there anymore, it's a vacant lot with a big dirt mound in the middle of it that gets smaller every year. Whoever was going to build there gave up, I guess. The windows of the Cigoletti House are almost all boarded. The front porch is all busted up. The Lacrosse Boys, a gang I think broke up or moved out to Dundalk years ago, left their mark beneath the front upper window on the right, a curvy moon with a wavy line running through.

As Orson explained to his viewers when his live stream began, the Cigoletti House is not one of the more famous spooky places. From 1982 to 1989 it was owned by Sibelius and Sinnolia Cigoletti, brother and sister. They were in their thirties at the time. Artists. He did experimental portraits and she did more abstract art. They both had shows around the east while they were alive, but they were real reclusive, never let themselves be photographed. The rumors said they were both extremely promiscuous, and things eventually turned darker. There were reports of them throwing strange sex parties inside the house where the guests dressed up in bizarre costumes and stayed for days. There was a lot of drug use... but it was all kept mostly quiet because it all took place inside the art world. That was who made up Sibelius and Sinnolia's guest list, people from the city.

Then one night a fancy young Danish art broker named Per Landsassen never returned from the house after one of these parties, and the stories really got out. The police investigation didn't really come to anything. And only about six months after that, Sibelius and Sinnolia's bodies were found on a mattress on the floor inside one of the upstairs bedrooms. They were naked together, and they both had a ton of heroin in their system, and there was evidence an incestuous relationship had been going on for a long time. Sibelius's most famous painting, *The Night is Cold and You Must Be Tired*, lay at Sinnolia's feet, scarred in one corner by her long, jagged toenails.

Good luck affording any of the Cigoletti siblings' works today. It goes right to chichi private collectors. Museums won't touch it because of everything that happened. Baltimore County owns the house.

Adding to the intrigue tonight, Orson said into his podcasting mic at about half past eight, *is that there have been a few disappearances in Seven Bells recently, highly unusual for a very small town.* Yeah, this was true. I probably shouldn't have been out in the Slabs.

I climbed up onto the porch very carefully; the steps were rotted. I wanted to move kind of fast because the house was in plain view of a couple of addresses across the street. The door had, in fact, been opened for me. It wasn't a key that had done it. The lock had simply been busted by Orson's girlfriend. Nothing legal about *that*. Into the Cigoletti House I went for the first time in my life.

- Bronwen, welcome back to the show. Been a while!

Apologies. I've been real busy with my book.

- How's that going?

Not too bad. I've just got a lot of information to sort through. You get it. But I was listening, and it occurred to me suddenly when you mentioned Per Landsassen that we should talk about the Green Man theory.

- Yes... the Green Man theory being the tie that a lot of people believe proved the Cigolettis' guilt in his murder in the late eighties. Do you want to take us through that? I didn't know the Cigolettis were ever on your radar.

Well, they weren't for long, but I did do a deep dive into them back when... ah, what was the name of that terrible TV movie...

- The one with the guy from Dawson's Creek.

Correct.

- That movie was just barely based on the true story.

Correct. But yeah, when the police searched one of the bedrooms on the top floor, they found a sheet with green paint all over it, which wasn't especially strange since they were painters, but what the police seemed to miss was that when the sheet was laid out fully flat—and this was never noticed until other people saw the crime scene photos years later—the paint patterns really did seem to match up with how the contours of a human body would print on them. Imprint on them. Arms, legs, everything. And what had happened was, at about four in the morning on the night Per Landsassen disappeared, someone from the area called in about a man running down the road. I think it's... Pelbrook Road? Peldrick Road, something—

- Pine Avenue.

Yes. Sorry, it's been a while. They said they saw a man with green paint all over him running down that road, which is maybe a mile from the fields—

- Yes, so... my only problem with the Green Man theory was that I had thought that those police photos which were released, ah... they were in black and white, and there was no mention in their report of the color of the paint they found on the sheet. So the story of this phone call to the police—you see what I'm saying? In and of itself, I don't know where there's a record of that.

But what we do have, okay, is this testimony by, um... I have the name right here actually... just give me a minute...

Even before I closed the door behind me I coughed on that stale dry air, not quite like anything else I'd ever drawn into my lungs. It wasn't much warmer inside than out. In the total dark I fumbled around in my backpack and came up with my flashlight. My life for the next four hours would be only what I'd see by its glow, and I knew right away I'd overestimated its capabilities.

There was nothing left in the house, of course. No furniture. Lots of loose boards and bricks were still scattered all over the floor. Lots of gouges in the walls. They'd all been painted different colors back in the day. Dark blue, dark red, dark green. Every room different. All the colors were dull and washed out now.

Beyond the living room was a big kitchen. The old linoleum floor was missing a perfect giant circle of material, neatly cut it looked like. Maybe that's what they do when they need evidence or something, I don't know—do they cut a sample of the floor and take it with them, the police? Is that what that was, maybe?

There was a closed door in the hallway, and I didn't want to open it. I really didn't. But I forced myself to. It used to be a bedroom, I suppose. One of the few windows in the house that wasn't boarded up was in there. I checked out the view. It looked out on the big back yard. If you were to walk across that yard and into the trees and just keep going for about ten minutes on foot, you'd wind up in the field where someone thought they'd found Per Landsassen's headless body in 1989. But it was just a drifter's. Thirty-four years ago, that was.

I stashed my backpack inside the closet. It was getting real heavy, and I shoved my copy of *Red Mars* into my jeans pocket for later. There was time to explore upstairs. I stopped for a full minute when one of the top steps creaked so loud I thought the whole staircase was going to collapse.

There were two more bedrooms and another bathroom up there. I didn't stay long. That second floor was too far away from where I felt even kind of safe. I considered the basement next. Just off the kitchen. When I opened the door to go down there, I thought I heard rats running around. I really hate rats. Sometimes you'll see them in the slabs. No. I closed the door again. The cold sunk into me in a way it hadn't outside. Outside it was at least a clean, natural cold.

I called Orson's number right on time, at 8:40, and I was 'on the air,' as they say. *We usually get about a couple thousand live streamers*, he'd told me. Very exciting. After the preliminary introductions I started the video share, right through my phone camera. There was a tech glitch at first but then he said, *Yes, yes, we can see, it's on everyone's screen now!* So I took everyone on a partial tour. I wasn't expected to say much of anything, which was good. People typed comments into the chat. Orson, oblivious to my plan, gave everyone the history of the house. The video dropped sometimes but the first check-in was only ten minutes long. Then I hung up. Not a bad way to make five hundred bucks. I opened my book, tried to get comfortable, and waited for Stony.

- OwlCreekBridge71, welcome.

Hi Orson, ah.... do you know about that painting, The Night is Cold and You Must Be Tired?

- Sure.

Yeah, well, I've been trying for years to get people to believe I actually put a bid on it when it got sold back in the nineties.

- Really!

Yeah, I was, ah... I was doing really well in real estate back then, so I gave it a shot... it was a very, ah, interesting process to say the least.

- Did you get to see the painting or did you, ah....

Ha, well....

- ...did you value your sanity too much?

Well, the way it worked was, you had to buy your way into the auction itself at a certain level. I seem to recall it was something like five thousand dollars, something outrageous...

- Ouch.

...and to actually see the painting in person, you had to fly out somewhere. So I never got to see it. The bid I submitted was about a fifth of what the painting eventually went for.

- Was this, like, in a catalog with other things, or...

Yeah, a lot of abstract pieces, but it was some auction house in Montreal so you had to deal with them through a broker, it was all by phone.

- Hard to believe a reputable place would even run a photo of that in their catalog.

Well, let me tell you something about art buyers. You know, if it's valuable, they'll, ah... they'll forgive being offended or freaked out.

- Yeah, just looking at that thing online is more than enough for me.

I think it's probably hanging on some dictator's wall now, like Vladimir Putin or somebody.

- I didn't think I'd want to have sex for the rest of my life after seeing it.

Ha! Well...

The knock came at quarter past nine. Way too soon. At first I didn't know what to do, but I remained calm. When the knock came again, I got to my feet and opened the front door.

A cop was out there. Young guy. Asked me if I was aware this was private property. He must have seen the light at just the right moment. I was ready. I already had the papers in my hand and I explained everything. Maybe *too* well, too much. *They're doing a photography exhibit at the State Archives, I said, history of the county.*

Where's your camera? he asked. And I held the sucker up. A Canon EOS Rebel. I even opened the door further and gestured toward the tripod in the corner of the room, where I'd laid some things out on a blanket too. Photography things. Gave him my I.D. Said that yes, the name on the top sheet was a good contact to call and confirm everything.

It was a rough two minutes, but two minutes was all it was. The cop didn't seem very interested in me. There were only a couple more questions. He told me to keep the papers and keep my I.D. handy in case I was visited again. There were foot patrols in the area that night.

Because of the disappearances? I said. He told me he couldn't make any particular comment about that. And then he stepped off the porch and went on his way without even wanting to come in and look around. The Seven Bells police. There were always more troubling matters to pursue.

I called Stony. He would be on his way, walking from the trailer park on the west side. He asked about the ghost hunter. *He had to go out for a bit, I said. He has this van full of stuff and he wanted to get some kind of reading all around the yard. Weird electronic stuff like I've never seen.* I knew that would excite Stony, whose place was full of old library books about ESP and reincarnation and the fourth dimension and ghosts.

I still had time to prepare for him. I went back into the first floor bedroom and into the closet. Pulled my backpack out. Big thing it is, bought for my overnight hikes on the Cornice Trail. I took out the duct tape and the rope and the crowbar and the cleaver I had stolen from the diner where I work, and brought them all out into the living room. Stuck them all under the blanket on the floor where I could get to them quickly.

I got kind of extra curious about the house, my surroundings, the evidence of people coming in and going out again over the years. The homeless staying one night and moving on, or maybe squatting there for months. The burn marks, the meaningless pencil traces on the walls, the gouges everywhere, from boredom or anger. An old empty bag of Doritos pinned under a broken board. Two empty but unbroken bottles of beer on the bathroom floor near where the toilet used to be. Just a hole there now.

I played the beam of the flashlight over the nooks and corners. I went upstairs again, partially to make myself less afraid of it. *FATSO INVITE ME TO THE PROM*, one bit of graffiti read. That was low on the south wall in what was probably the master bedroom, where Sibelius and Sinnolia must have done a lot of their strange things, with their guests or just by themselves. Probably the room where they had been found together, dead.

Then I spotted something that didn't make much sense. A weird stain on the floor in the hallway. I'd already passed it twice without noticing. I needed to start being more observant. The stain must have been eight inches across. Sticky-looking. The beam of the flashlight, which was getting really weak, altered its original color. Soon I was going to have to dig a fresh set of batteries out of my backpack.

I didn't want to touch the stain. The thought of it sickened me. But I really wanted to know if it felt how it looked, which was still a little slick. So I did touch it.

It was almost completely dry, almost. It felt like if you were to touch the sticky side of a piece of Scotch tape. Only when I looked at my fingertip real close did I see that there was a tiny bit of red tint to the black smudge left on my skin. I almost retched as I wiped it on my jeans.

I grew up in Seven Bells. It's a hole. Very happy to have gotten out of there when I went off to college. But we'd talk about the house all the time, in the neighborhood. Because the rumor was they got these indecency complaints, so as kids our imaginations went crazy with that. And then there was a fire, I don't think you talked about the freaky fire. And then, ah.... one night, must have been... oh, 1987? ... we were messing around and we were drinking a little, I was maybe fourteen... and it got to be, 'Come on, let's go check it out'... and the next thing I knew there were four of us on the property, the rear part of the yard. It was night. Eleven at night...

The basement of the Cigoletti House smelled like modeling clay. Twelve steps down into the dark. The railing had been snapped in half at some point, so the last part of the journey was a bit treacherous.

I forget how it was me who got picked to sneak up to the house. But I did. And I remember kneeling down and looking through the basement window and... I couldn't believe it, right there inside.... ah...

Here finally was a piece of furniture: a ripped blue sofa right in the middle of the floor, the cushions missing. In one corner of the big open space was a pile of boards and bricks that came up all the way to my waist. That debris suggested there had once been a separate room down here, gutted long ago.

Here now in front of me was something else strange. The basement had two windows no bigger than placemats set into the back wall, both so grimy that the glass kicked the flashlight beam right back to me. The window to my left was open, slid along its cheap metal track about five inches. Anyone could get inside the house very easily; it didn't take Orson's girlfriend to hack the lock on the front door. Pushed up against the wall beneath the window, as a means of support as one climbed in or climbed out, was an overturned plastic crate with the name of a pet food company on the side.

If I looked down... there was this shriveled old man lying on a table, and he was naked. Some woman was drawing on him. It wasn't painting, it wasn't with a brush, she was just, ah... drawing on his stomach. He was clamped down though, there were these clamps. I'm very sure this guy did not want to be there.

I was watching this for a while because the woman was... you know, I was a kid, I was kind of hypnotized, I thought maybe she was gonna take her clothes off, you know. And then I... I heard something behind me and I turned... and there was this man standing in the yard, looking at me. I was so scared I started running, I just took off. But I was going the wrong way, away from my friends. They had to come find me.

- Do you think it was Sibelius, standing there?

I think it was.

The second knock at the door that night came at 11:15. I knew who it was this time though, and I opened the door kind of smiling.

Stony is a little guy, a little pudgy, always wearing some kind of pop culture t-shirt, stuff I don't even get usually. This time it was Wolverine.

He was trying to grow a beard again. He was clearly nervous when we shook hands, and not just because of the house and the darkness and the fact that I alone controlled the light. So as not to make it any worse, I immediately agreed with him that yeah, it *was* scary in here, and before he could even ask where the paranormal guy was, I gave him my story, which was that he had been bothered so much by some kind of audio thing he'd picked up just outside the back door that he'd driven back to Hampden for a half hour to get some more equipment. *He seemed really freaked out*, I told Stony, who just blinked a few times in wonder and said, *Really? EVP, was it EVP?*

EVP, that sounds right, I replied. Shaking Stony's hand had nearly made me sick again. I am proud of myself for making that sacrifice.

I took him around a bit. We went up the stairs. What was this guy like? Stony wanted to know. *Good reputation*, I said, *I checked him out online*, and Stony said, *Yeah, but how did you find him?*

That was an easy one. *Other way around*, I said. *You and I are gonna be on that Orson guy's show about an hour from now!* And I gave my old friend an impressive number of true details about the situation we found ourselves in.

I'd put an old newspaper I'd found over the bloodstain in the hallway, and my backpack over that, so Stony never saw it as we moved from room to room. He was right; our footsteps really did sound like we were below the earth, not above it. He took it all in like a poor kid on a school field trip to a fancy museum. *The guy's got some equipment in the basement*, I told him before he could ask the obvious question. But there was no need to worry. Stony's brain never moved that fast. He was too busy gawking at the dangerously crooked ceiling fan above him, which seemed to be hanging only by a single screw.

It was really sinking into Stony that he and I were here in the house all alone. *A lot scarier with two people instead of three*, he said nervously.

Nahhhhhh, I assured him. *We'll be all right*.

He put a hand up to the window in the master bedroom and felt the cold air that seeped through a tiny crack between the glass and the wooden plank affixed outside to cover the cutout. He walked to the spot where a bed had once been. You could still see the traces of its shape in the way the color of the planks hadn't faded quite as much. He stared down at them, running the whole history through his mind. There was very little Stony didn't know about the Cigoletti House. In the foul dark I was looking at a man who had crossed off a major part of his bucket list. What a favor I had done for him on this night!

Downstairs, a knock at the front door again. Stony, assuming it was the paranormal investigator, looked relieved not to be alone with me anymore.

I hesitated, my thoughts racing, but I understood I had no choice but to answer it. The knocking was soft, not urgent at all. But it kept coming. Whoever was out there was not going to go away.

We went back down the stairs. Just as we got to the bottom step, we saw the front door pushed inward a little. They finally couldn't wait.

It was a man in his sixties, or even seventies maybe. Real skinny. Big coat. Button-up shirt tucked into his slacks the way old men do even when they're just walking down their driveway to get their mail. Zachary, his name was. Professor at McDaniel. He didn't care when I told him I had papers to let me in the house, didn't care at all. He'd been listening to Orson's live stream, so he knew I was out here. I told him me and Stony were probably about to leave, but he knew I had another check-in with the show coming up.

I wish you would skip it, he said. He'd driven out there just to tell us that. It was the worst possible night to be out here in the house, Professor Zachary explained to us. There were alignments around us, he said, alignments that were very deep and strange. Sometimes they happen, he said. Mostly they don't. This was just not a night anyone wanted to be here.

Poor Stony, I thought he looked terrified. *Like the anniversary of them dying or something?* he asked this man. But it wasn't as simple as that, apparently.

The professor turned his head back and forth between us. It was weird how he was giving us both the exact, precise same amount of eye contact, like he was programmed. The professor looked real uncomfortable, like he was trying consciously to not look at any part of the room, take in no detail of the house he didn't absolutely have to. I kept the flashlight pointed at his feet, so his head was sort of fuzzy in the dark.

Like, what could happen to us if we hung around? Stony asked him. That made the old professor think on it for a bit. He said we might see things we otherwise wouldn't, and maybe that was all. Our behavior might become erratic maybe. *But if I'm right*, he said, *there can be long-term things*.

I assured him we'd probably just go. I could tell he wanted to get out of there now. I did ask him, very politely, what his credentials were to claim such a dramatic thing about the house, and how is this for a koinکیدink: He and some scholar friends had been the last private owners of the place, in

2002. I realized in that moment that the deed papers which had been copied and partially forged from the public records so I wouldn't get busted for trespassing actually had his name on them. I didn't feel the need to reveal that bit. The last thing he told us was that if we stayed, no one could help us.

And then he left. No fuss. Turned around, opened the door, went back out onto the porch. He had a little tan Honda at the curb. Didn't look back at the house, not for a second. Started the car. Drove away down the silent street. Not a single other house on the block had a light on.

I looked at my watch. Time was slipping away. Stony wanted to go too. Now. He didn't feel right about this anymore. I told him, *Sure*. I mean, it would be interesting to wait for the paranormal guy to come back, but I didn't want to do any of this without Stony, of course not. I just had to gather up my stuff, all the stuff on the floor.

But that's the ghost hunter's camera stuff, isn't it? Stony pointed out helpfully.

You know, when you have a design, you need to cover every eventuality, and something as simple as not having a sufficient answer at just the wrong moment can force your hand too soon unless you can think on your feet. But as my dear father would tell you, that's never really been my strong point.

Did you hear that? I asked Stony.

Hear what? he said.

From the basement, I said. I handed him the flashlight and walked past him. I bent down and rummaged around under the blanket on the floor, making sure my back was completely blocking his view.

I'm going down the stairs, I said to Stony. *I just need you to point the light as I go.*

Why'd you even bring that? Stony asked, nodding at the crowbar I had dug out. He shone the flashlight directly into my face and I put a hand out gently, to push the tip down a few inches.

Like you said, I replied, *it's scary in here.*

He followed me down the hall and into the kitchen. He stumbled once on a loose board, righted himself, shook the flashlight to try to strengthen its beam, and asked what the sound had been, because he hadn't heard anything.

I hummed some music for a few seconds to calm him down. *Remember that?* I said to him. *From that movie Phantasm? Remember when we rented that? Like a week before Erol's closed for good?* I was grinning real wide.

I'm going home, Stony said, and he began to turn.

You're gonna die first, I told him, and swung the crowbar.

Orson had begun to show his audience *House of Usher* with Vincent Price at 10:30, leaving his viewers to comment on it throughout in a scrolling text window on the right side of the screen, which was soon filled with jokes, silly commentary, the shout-outs between guild members who knew each other, the first-timers dropping in, the veterans swapping inside gags and emojis. I dialed back into the stream just before my final check-in of the night, when in the movie the house of Usher imploded and collapsed in a fiery red cloud of melancholy and madness. On my phone I watched steam rise from the fetid ground. *Good luck getting your security deposit back!* typed StrawberryGirl0. *More room for condos!* typed SlowJoeBuck.

think of all the people who had to come to the rubble afterward though, someone calling themselves Talisman added in lowercase text, disregarding punctuation and capitalization. *carrying all that away in carts and wheelbarrows day after day.* To which others replied with multiple question marks and tiny round digital faces with puzzled expressions. *Way to make the story even more depressing!* typed someone named TardisDealer, adding a little blue cloud to each side of their typoridden sentence.

i bet children played in the vacant lot and then talked about it when they were old, Talisman went on among the conversational fuss that had already left him or her behind. Then a chatbot informed all that Talisman had left the room.

It was more video Orson wanted for the final segment, and I gave it to him. I stayed out of the basement once again and gave the audience just the main floor and the top floor, holding my phone camera out ahead of me with one hand, illuminating the steps ahead with the flashlight held in the other. Just a few more minutes, that was all that was required of me. I was asked if I had seen anything or heard anything strange, and I said *No, not really,* but I decided there was no harm in telling Orson about the professor's visit, and he ate that up, every detail, and about every detail I was honest and accurate. Orson thought I was lying probably, being a showman, but how could I not sound anything but convincing to his streaming audience? I showed them all the bedrooms yet again, and the bathroom, and the hallway, mostly for the benefit of those who had joined the stream late, but also to provide one last chill to the viewers who had stayed all the way through.

Stop for a second, stop for a second, Orson's voice squeaked through my tiny phone speaker at one point. There had been a sudden flurry of activity in the chat. A number of people seemed to want me to turn and point the camera at the north end of the hallway. Many viewers claimed to have seen something.

I missed it, Orson said. *Is anyone watching recording this, do you want to help us out here?* A few people were. I was asked to remain in place while Orson got on a separate screen tab and rolled back the video. There was awkward silence as the screen commentary continued to flow.

Oh yeah, I heard him finally say. *Duncan, did you not see that giant bird when you turned your body away from that window?*

I moved back down the hallway toward the window. One wavy crack had split the glass long ago on an almost perfect diagonal. *There's a huge bird,* Orson was saying as he watched the video. *It flew past, there's just a couple of frames, but... wait, is that a bird or... something else?*

Others urgently chimed in. But I had no more time for their nonsense. Until dawn if they wanted to they could debate whether it was a bird or the face of a woman, a young woman peering in as if she were floating outside. Frame by frame they could forensically go. That wasn't why I was there.

In the basement, Stony was where I had laboriously dragged him, then left him, bound crudely to the sofa as best as I could manage. It had taken all the duct tape left on the roll. There had barely been any left to cover his mouth. The chloroform had mostly worn off but he still too groggy to speak. That's some strange stuff, chloroform. It had taken several minutes to put Stony down. He blinked away the light shining in his eyes and seemed to recognize me, at least. I was worried that hitting him in the stomach with the crowbar, just that one swing, had done so much damage he might not wake up. You can't assume it's going to be like in the movies.

I went to the window and dragged the plastic crate across the dust over to the sofa, and I sat down on it. And I looked into Stony's face.

It wasn't that I was going to hurt him because I thought he'd killed Misty. That had never seriously entered my mind because Stony was weak, Stony was incapable of actual violence. I was going to hurt him because of the way he had hounded Misty for years, like a lovesick puppy, from her early troubles all the way into her time of complete desperation, when she would finally turn to *anyone* to help her, because I wouldn't any longer. As soon as he got his chance, he had catered to her sickness and her addictions and made them even worse, thinking that was love. But when she disappeared, he could think only of himself and saving his own miserable dope-dealing skin. So he had lied, and made what the police were trying to do, which was find my sister, that much harder.

I told Stony I would split the responsibility for Misty's vanishing three ways: one-third to the heartlessness of my mother and father, one-third to me, one-third to him. Mom and Dad had their due coming, but not till the next night, when I would have to take the bus out to Catonsville, on the slim chance I had not been arrested by then.

I had the cleaver in my hand and, because I was not an experienced or skilled torturer, I just moved the tip of it toward Stony's face, and when he closed his eyes I rested the edge of the blade on his right eyelid, and I just let it be there, pushing in just a little, not even drawing blood, just so he would feel the steel against his skin. I told him what I intended to do with his hands. I had decided there was some kind of symbolism in the hands thing, but I was having such difficulty concentrating I forgot to tell him what it was. I expected him to tremble and shake and make noises, but he had become very docile, very calm. I didn't like that. It wasn't like Stony to not complain.

I heard a rapping on the front door upstairs, one more time. My own fault, really. I had lingered too long. We make our own problems and we create our own solutions.

I knew this was not the police or any rational adult because of its petty urgency and because it stopped right away. Still, though, I needed to *know*. I turned away from Stony and I climbed the

stairs. I looked back at him just to see how small he looked, bound and gagged and helpless. I tucked the cleaver into the waistband of my jeans for my return to the basement.

I opened the door into the kitchen and crept out into the hallway. Whoever had been out there was likely already long gone. Kids, probably. The possibility even existed that someone else local had been watching the stream and wanted to have a bit of fun, scaring me.

Nevertheless. I walked to the door and opened it, just a crack. It had gotten real windy outside. A balloon was sailing down Pound Street, one of those big Mylar things, heart-shaped. Just when it seemed like it was headed up into the sky, it got knocked down again by a gust. I went out onto the porch, no longer caring who knew I was there. I liked the feel of the wind on my face. Not until that moment did I realize how poisoned the air inside the Cigoletti House was. I felt like someone emerging from months on a submarine. Just another half hour and I could go to sleep.

Another suggestion of movement caught my eye. A woman was out there, far away. In a long dress. She was walking toward the far end of the street, moving out of one pool of lamplight and into another where the pavement curved and worked up toward Norris Road. She stopped and turned back toward the house. Her face was an undefined blot.

Someone was waiting for her farther up. Everything above the waist was in the dark, but I am sure it was a man. She joined him. They dissolved into the dark together. Back inside I went.

When I got to the top of the basement stairs, I shone the flashlight downwards, at the filthy sofa. Stony was gone.

I clambered down the stairs recklessly, not being careful at all with my balance. The tape that had bound Stony to the sofa had been cut in one long neat path.

High above me somewhere, so far away it might have come from a different house altogether, I heard Stony give a friendly shout. He invited me to come back up. He sounded very different. There was a confidence in his voice that had never been there before.

I decided to cloak myself right away. I shut off the flashlight. That meant I had to reach out and feel the darkness as I went, my fingers always grasping for the next touch to guide me. I bent over and felt for the steps to judge where the first one's centerpoint was. I began to climb, delicately, and the outline of the door above me eventually swam into view.

Some nice woman let me out! Stony called out to me from high above. Now he sounded closer, but maybe not ground-floor close. Maybe he, too, was navigating a flight of stairs with as much delicacy as he could muster, and in fear of stumbling and falling in the dark, for he had no light source. *She's gone now,* Stony said. *It's just you and me.*

I waited on the top step for any sound of movement, but he was being clever. I moved back through the door I had left open. I looked down the hallway leading from the kitchen, but everything was lost in a colorless swampy void.

Stony said he had something to show me. All I had to do was come part of the way upstairs. I thought maybe his voice wasn't even coming from up there anymore. So I waited. My watch ticked the seconds.

There was a thump from nearby, followed by another and another, and rotting wood buckled and cracked. I crouched because I thought Stony was running down the stairs—but no, what I had heard was that he had thrown something down them.

Here then, he called. Not my first time here, Dunc. Surprised?

That was when I knew it was endgame, just from the tone in his voice. I assumed he had the crowbar, but I thought the cleaver should do, and if I had to, I would beat him to death with the flashlight. I entered the hallway. From there, I had an excellent visual angle on the bottom of the staircase. I finally turned the flashlight back on and poked the beam in that direction.

Whatever he had thrown had gone all the way to the bottom. Bunch of rags, looked like at first. I moved closer.

Misty had not decomposed enough inside her clothes to become unrecognizable, just skinny and dark gray all over, like a mummy, like someone had painted her wasted body with stucco. Just her top half, actually. That was all there was. Her mouth had shriveled up more than any other part of her, and she seemed to be snarling at me.

I've been keeping everyone in the attic, Stony told me from the top of the stairs. Who was that woman? he asked. *She said, Now go kill each other. You ready to die, Dunc?*

Stony, the Stony no one really knew, was coming down. A hatchet was in his right hand, one of three he had squirreled away in the attic. And so, like the great plastic Warhammer warriors we used to play with in his grandmother's basement, we met in combat, he and I, while my sister stared off into one corner of the Cigoletti House with eyes shriveled to little dead raisins.

They came to me sometime before dawn, after I'd been sitting with my back against the bathroom door upstairs with my knees drawn up to my chest for some time. Hours. Maybe I even slept, I don't know. I don't remember sleeping, but it's possible I did.

A tiny fireglow appeared at the far end of hall, unexpected and warm and inviting, like the north star appearing from behind a cloud to a lonely traveler. A man and a woman emerged from the master bedroom. She held a small brass tray with a little candle sitting on it—I forget what you call those little candles. She was barefoot, wearing the same dress she'd been wearing out on Pound Street. She did not seem concerned as she moved that she might cut her foot on a piece of broken glass, or a protruding nail, or slip in blood. I found the strength to stand.

You're so strong, she said to me when the two of them had drawn close. *We were right to wait for you. Would you like to be with us? Lie down with us?* Smiling seemed an easy thing for her, but not for the man. He said nothing, expressed nothing.

All I had to do was pinch the flame of the candle out, wet the tips of my fingers and pinch it out. And if I didn't want to do it now, I could come back. It didn't matter when, because they lived there, and I would always be welcome. There was even a glass of water on the tray, because they knew I was likely parched.

I didn't need to wait. It had been a long, long time since someone had asked for my company. So imagining sunny mornings with my new friends out on the front porch, drinking orange juice at a linen-covered table and learning about art, I set out with joy towards the north star.

chains

My name is Milner Holcomb. You know, life is just like Reverend Abe said it was back when I was in Youth Service Squires. It's this big book of happy stories and sad stories, and you have to live through both kinds to figure out what it all means.

What happened to the Mahaffey's was definitely a sad story. Everyone said they were nice people. They grew cabbage and carrots and onions and oats. Their house was bigger than ours, but they had two kids. Then one day in spring there was an accident with an auger, and the little girl died. Chrissy. I was too young to go to the funeral, that's what they told me, so I stayed behind that day and built a fort inside.

Everywhere you went in town, people talked about it. How sad it was. Chrissy's brother—his name was Leonard—he was the only one I ever really saw. One time Mom and Dad took me for fried chicken in town and he was playing a pinball game alone in the corner. He would have been ten then. Chrissy was just six when she died.

I didn't know any of them, really, but even I got sad sometimes thinking about their little girl gone and all. All through me growing up, if there weren't any leaves on the trees I could see the house way far off when I walked to school. Couldn't see it otherwise, so it was just wintertime I'd see it. Kids didn't talk about them, ever. We only talked about kids who were in our same grade, or football players. Not grownup stuff.

So Chrissy died in that accident and then there was the funeral and life moved on, and a few days after Christmas I remember Dad coming in real late for dinner. I was getting super-hungry. And Mom asked him what was going on, and he said, *Well, seems like the Mahaffey's aren't tending the farm at all.* He and some other people went over to see them the week after. They took some food including some pork chops my mother made special. I was real jealous of that 'cause it was my favorite food, with the bread crumbs on them. That was nine months since the accident. I didn't think much about it except I didn't want pork chop night to get skipped. We didn't get to have them much.

It was in March that we were taking the Nash over to Crump Creek to get the transmission looked at. Dad was driving, I was in the back. We were on Nuxhall Road. He turned down the radio right in the middle of my favorite song and he said to my Mom, *The little girl isn't letting the Mahaffey's out of the house.* She just shook her head real sad. And I thought, *Well, that isn't fair.*

What I mean is, you heard talk about the accident if you listened around the grownups. Just in the beginning, mostly. Stuff about how the accident and Chrissy dying was kind of Mr. Mahaffey's fault. At the spaghetti dinner at the Grange Hall, for example, I heard it. Or when my mother went to visit the Lutts and brought me along so I could play with Ethan Lutt—he had more army men than any kid I ever knew, even Roman soldiers so we could do Roman fighting. That was when I heard the word 'negligence' for the first time, which was a pretty fancy word to hear when you're about nine. 'Negligence.' It seemed like everyone thought Mr. Mahaffey was a decent enough worker, but maybe he'd messed up and then made the mess-up worse by forgetting he'd messed up, something like that, and what happened with the auger happened because he was real dumb at the wrong time. Not so the sheriff would come or anything, just that there'd be talk, and Mr. Mahaffey feeling even more awful than you'd even think. I didn't even really know what an auger did, a kid in my class had to explain it to me. Dad wasn't a farmer, he made dishware.

So I guess starting sometime after Christmas, the Mahaffeys couldn't leave their house anymore because Chrissy wouldn't let them. There was just the three of them, Mr. and Mrs. Mahaffey and Leonard. He hadn't been in school for a little while. I remember a Sunday afternoon when Reverend Abe and a bunch of people including my Mom went over there, and then coming back to our house and talking things over with tea. Even my teacher, Mrs. Bean, went. Not much anyone could do really, if Chrissy was that mad about the accident. The church would help them out, and my Mom put together sort of an assistance group to bring them things and do their shopping for them and just generally check in a lot. There wouldn't have been much for those poor people to do stuck indoors except listen to the radio and read. There were always a lot of books brought over. They said Mrs. Mahaffey was a big reader, dime novels.

I just didn't think it would last as long as it did, but what do I know. A year after the accident there was a thing where Mrs. Mahaffey was found at the edge of Mr. Packoff's orchard in the middle of the day. She was rolling around and raving and clawing at her face. They said she ran out of the house and got as far as the orchard and collapsed, and she was saying she couldn't take it anymore, that no matter how hard she prayed they couldn't go free, and they calmed her down and only when they brought her back to Mr. Mahaffey and he put her back in bed did she get better. She tried to get away from the house but she couldn't do it, it almost killed her. Chrissy made it like that.

All of us kids pretty much avoided going near the house. Mom said that was the respectful thing to do. It didn't do Leonard any good to see other kids playing outside when he couldn't go out. Our principal made sure he got his school books brought to him, and his parents taught him up okay, probably. Anyway, we mostly had no reason to go out on Auburn Road. It was a little out of the way and we had plenty of other places to play.

Nobody really seemed to know how long a thing like that could last. I asked Dad about it one time. I think I was eleven. He was fixing my bike. He said he guessed it depended. *Don't get it in your head to go near that house*, he told me, *that's not a nice thing to do*. So I swore I wouldn't.

I always looked over in that direction in winter when I walked to school though, I couldn't help it. Mr. Mahaffey's green Ford kept sitting there. There was one time, just one time, when I think I saw Leonard out on the porch. He was just moving something around, a chair. So the porch was okay to go on. They just couldn't do anything crazy like leave the property, I supposed, or Chrissy would make something really bad happen. Sometimes at night I'd lie there wondering if she knocked on tables with her little invisible fists, or maybe even appeared in the corner of the room sometimes, or said things only the Mahaffeys could hear, or how any of it happened.

Reverend Abe mentioned them in services once in a great while. Please pray for our friends the Mahaffeys, that kind of thing. But mostly it just became seeing names on a signup sheet at church.

Who wants to bring the family more vegetables this month, or milk, or medicine stuff if they needed it. They had to put the house into something called a receivership so the family could have a little money coming in, and then they technically didn't even own the house anymore, the town did. So yeah, I grew up real grateful that nothing like that ever happened to us.

The year before I got out of school for good, I guess curiosity just got the best of me. I hadn't thought about the Mahaffeys for a long time. This was going on ten years since the accident, and they were still being kept in the house. The Harvest Dance came around and I didn't feel like going, so I thought maybe I'd go over to Buck Lasgow's house and play cards. Buck wasn't home though, so I just started wandering over to the Grange Hall to see how they decorated it that year. I thought maybe I'd go in and get some punch, but too many people and all that music, I don't really like that. And I did a little detour past the Mahaffeys' land. I couldn't help myself.

The fields behind it were all dead and muddy and brown. I didn't get too close to the house, I made sure not to. It was weird, looking at it. Knowing that something was going on in there that was so bad, but it looked like any other house. No lights in the windows. I guess everyone went to sleep real early. Except that wasn't quite right. The longer I stood there, the more I thought that, yeah, there *was* light, but not the lamp kind. Real weak light inside every one of the rooms on the side of the house I was looking at. I'd call it gray light almost. Didn't really have a color. Real soft, you'd only see it if you looked and looked, and started to think, *Why is it I can see so many details there in the windows?* If you were only walking past, you'd never notice.

I turned around finally. This sort of shiver came over me. All it was, was that light that you couldn't even call light.

Mr. Mahaffey tried to burn the house down from inside four years after that. The fire truck came and they went in and they put it out before it got out of hand. They knew the family couldn't leave, so they didn't force them out. Reverend Abe came back over and between him and the firemen, they explained to Mr. Mahaffey that this wasn't going to solve anything. My mom said they asked him if he wanted to try to come with them—maybe things would be different if he tried now—and supposedly they got as far as the door and he started to shake real bad and tried to crawl under the couch.

My mom and I were at Inspiration Thrift looking at shirts and I asked her if anyone knew how Leonard was holding up. She'd gone visiting over there about a year before. Leonard was the one I thought about most, I guess because he was in school with me. Mom said he looked much older than he really was, they all did. Unhealthy. Doctor Saxon went around once a year, but that wasn't the same as knowing you could leave and go in for a real treatment if something came up, and it wasn't the same as being out in the town and seeing what other people were doing and eating to keep themselves from getting sick or run down.

I guess I was getting bolder as I got older, because I didn't think it was a big deal to walk past the house again after the fire. This time it was during the day. You could see the damage plain as anything. It was worse than I thought from watching the whole thing from a distance at night the week before. Black char all around the upper bedroom window, like a big black eye, and part of the roof was sagging there. Must have been a scary fire. I wondered if that was Chrissy's room. I waited for a while to see if someone would come out, maybe onto the porch. I was grown up now and figured I could say hello if that happened. But it didn't. It was real cold out. The Mahaffeys, stayed inside, all of them. Not a sound.

I even walked along the edge of the grass out front this time, right beside the road. I thought maybe someone would see me and come out. I looked over my shoulder kind of in a sneaky way to see what I could see, which wasn't much.

But then I saw something weird on the north side of the house. There were these long frozen puddles in the grass, super shiny on top, and I walked across a couple as I went because I like to hear the ice crack. Looking at the longest, shiniest one, almost as long as I was tall, it was almost like looking into a blurry, bumpy mirror. I could see the top of the house in it, kind of distorted.

What I saw in the reflection in the ice was a thing the upper window, just behind the glass. I thought, *Do the Mahaffeys have a dog?* But it was too big to be a dog, this thing looking out. And when it turned and moved away, it did it smooth, like a person would.

It was shaped funny. Too many angles, if you get what I mean. I looked up at the real window to get a look that wasn't blurry and bumpy, but it was already gone. Nothing there.

I almost stopped breathing for a second, I was so surprised. Then I kept walking, but faster. I told myself, never again. No more getting curious.

A lot of years went by then, you know how they do. I guess there are people who really stop and think about how that works—time—but I was never that type. I liked just getting up and eating a little breakfast with Mom and Dad, and starting to make it for them when they got old, and going to work at Dan Niska Builders and coming home and fishing on Saturdays. Sometimes at work Dan would give us a really long lunch break, and you could take your pole right over to Donnycake Stream and there you were, fishing in the middle of a working day, not a care in the world. Mom and Dad would always worry about me, they said I needed to make friends, they said it was time for me to get married. There were some girls in the church who I kind of liked but I don't know, I was always kind of nervous around them, it just didn't work out so well. I didn't mind. Dad and I followed the White Sox and there was always a lot to do around the house, helping Mom, and at church especially there were things going on. So you get old someday, big deal I always think.

Mr. Mahaffey died of peritonitis. There couldn't really be a proper funeral because Mrs. Mahaffey and Leonard still couldn't leave the house, even for that, so a lot of people went over there and sat with them. But guess who couldn't? Me, because I was in the hospital with a hernia for almost two weeks. Mikey Branch at work went. He said the house felt really weird when he was in there. Some people who went over had to lie down at home for a while, his kid sister included. That was funny because Dad was like that, the couple of times over the years he'd been in the house. He said he felt strange and had to go to bed till dinner. Mikey told me the house was a mess and it smelled. They didn't even wash their clothes anymore. He said Leonard built mail order models a lot and they were everywhere.

Maybe a year after Mr. Mahaffey passed on, Vaughn Cromartie from the fire brigade, which was just three guys really, told me he thought they were all going insane in that house. He was in there the night of the big fire and he talked to Mr. Mahaffey, and he said the old man hadn't been making a lick of sense. Got his words out of order even. Sat there holding a picture of Chrissy and talking nonsense. Even Reverend Abe got tipsy once at a St. Patrick's dance and said they'd gone crazy. That made sense. You figure that's got to make sense. I asked Vaughn if he felt sick after helping to put out the fire, like having to go to bed sick, but he said he was mostly all right because he didn't linger there.

There was some year—I think it was the year after Mrs. Mahaffey died in her sleep—that I stopped by Chrissy’s little grave in Our Lady of Perpetual Help on my way out to help Uncle Louis in his garden. All he could do by that point was dig a little with his trowel and lay some seeds while I walked him from place to place. I remember that day at the cemetery because it was so nice. The snow was starting to fall, earliest snow we ever had. I found Chrissy’s grave. It was a simple thing. I felt sad because I supposed her folks had never gone there except maybe once, for the funeral. But I felt mad too, because of what she’d done to them. It didn’t seem reasonable, not to me, not at all.

I thought of this one time when I was at Lendy’s, where I don’t usually ever go, and old Mr. Mills was sitting at the bar and he was drinking a lot, and I said something about that poor little girl, and he looked at me over the tops of his big bifocals and he snorted and he said, *I’ll tell you what Big Ron told me.* Big Ron was Mrs. Mahaffey’s half-brother. He lived out of state and only came through when he got a truck route that took him. *She wasn’t right from the start, bucko,* he said to me. *From the start, that poor little girl’s heart was painted black. That’s the kind of girl she was, and I guess Big Ron would know.* But I don’t see how he could have. A girl that small? I thought about moving some of the dead leaves away from her headstone, just move them a little out of the way to be kind, but I didn’t even do that. Her folks were buried one on either side of her.

I was getting up close to being forty years old when it finally felt like it ended. That was when I put my name on the church tending list to make sure Leonard kept getting his deliveries from the food pantry. There were only two volunteers left on the list by then, me and Reverend Abe, and he didn’t move around so easy by then. I don’t want to say anything bad, but he went to Lendy’s an awful lot too. Anyway, people had forgotten the Mahaffeys. Life had moved on. So I figured why not do my part after all these years? I felt kind of a connection to the place.

So one cold day I took a bag of things over there, and I made myself go up on the porch and I knocked on the door. You could still see all the damage from the fire up above. Nothing had been really fixed except someone had put some tarpaper over where that part of the roof sagged. Wasn’t a Dan Niska job, I can tell you that for sure.

Leonard came out. Just a few years older than me he was, but he looked even older than that. He didn’t recognize me. I had to remind him we were in grade school together for a little while. He took the bag and came out onto the porch in a robe and slippers, and he sat down like his joints were paining him. He hadn’t shaved for a while. I didn’t want to just amscray, so I sat with him. He said he liked to come out and get some air once a while.

We had a pretty good talk, really. He remembered a lot about school. I told him what was going on in town. We talked about him making his models. He even mentioned his sister. He said he built a model train station for her and left it in her room, because she probably would have wanted one. He called her Little Biscuit.

I said, *Can you see her? Did you ever see her after she passed?* He said no. I said, *Not even one time?* He said no. I said, *Does she... say things?* He said no.

I asked if he ever thought he’d figure on trying to leave the house again, ever. Maybe she’d let it happen now, and he said that wasn’t possible. I asked him if he’d ever really tried. He said, *Yeah, a couple times.* I said, *What happened?*

Poor Leonard, he was looking out at the cabbage field like he was just noticing for the first time how dead it was, even though he probably saw it every day. He couldn’t take his eyes off it.

He said when he got as far as the yard, it felt like he was running in cold mud. His arms and legs wouldn't move right, and he couldn't breathe, and his skin would sting all over, and lights started flashing inside his head.

But that wasn't the worst of it. He said Chrissy made him *see* things. Like he was at the movies except the movie was all around him and he was inside of it, and it seemed to go on for hours even though it was just a minute or so. I didn't get that. I said to him, *Like, what did you see?*

He said, *I think I was far away, out in the stars. Outer space.*

That seemed crazy. But there were all these specific kinds of things he saw. Like an ocean that was burning. It was on fire, blue fire, under a black sky. Zig-zaggy lines of blue fire that were moving across the top of the water. Or... he was in a room looking out the window at a huge city, like he kind he'd never been to, me either, except all the buildings went up even above the clouds, and when the wind blew they bent just like skinny trees would bend, and he heard horns and music and language out there he didn't understand. And he saw one of the buildings explode because a river of blue fire had come and rolled right up it on every side, and it had finally just... burst. He told me it was the most awful thing he could imagine.

That's what he couldn't take. The things he saw, and the feeling of being millions and millions of miles away from home, and no way back.

I left him there on the porch and I walked home. I guessed then he was really far gone, like people said. By the time Mom made dinner, yeah, I felt real weak, and I had a sore throat, and I was so tired I wanted to lie down. I had a taste like oak bark in my mouth too. Eventually I felt okay again.

When Leonard died about four years after that, of heart stuff, they said in town *It's finally okay now, it's over, they're all gone. Chrissy will leave now, God rest her soul.* Mom and Dad never lived to see the end of things. They passed on within ten months of each other, no pain. That was the summer I dared to get drunk for the first time, on blackberry wine, and I backed the car right over the curb outside Lendy's. I guess I could have moved away then, but I figured why? I still liked it in town, and I liked my job. It was the job that brought me back to the Mahaffeys' house that one final time.

Like I said before, I'd been working for Dan Niska Builders since high school, and they got an order from the town that everything should be taken out of the house before it was torn down, and Dan had to figure out how much of a job that would be and then how much of the structural materials could be salvaged or sold off. Since I lived so close, he asked me to stop there one night on my way home and just take a guess at how many guys he'd need to do the first part, hauling all that stuff away.

Even though there was no reason for me to be scared, I was still kind of scared. I'd never forgotten that thing I'd seen in the ice, that reflection, and going inside the house alone wasn't something I wanted to do. I mean, how did I know Chrissy wouldn't still be there somewhere, and not want anyone in there?

It was winter, and night, and cold. The front door was unlocked. Inside, it really was a mess. Half the bulbs were out and Leonard never bothered to change them, so it was darker than it should have been. The church was going to arrange something to happen with all the stuff Dan eventually hauled out. Probably give it to the poor. But it wasn't anything good.

All the models Leonard made were on the bottom floor, spread out everywhere. He'd moved the sofa to clear out a big space. I think someone in town dropped them off so he could build them. It looked like he was working on one right up till the time he called the hospital and told them to come

over, but he never made it to the hospital. I had to step over models just to get to the kitchen. Little cars and cannons and monsters and houses and bridges and boats.

I went upstairs. Leonard's room was the small one. It was packed with the junk people had brought him, books and magazines and dirty clothes. Everything was everywhere. It smelled damp.

At the end of the hallway was Mr. and Mrs. Mahaffey's bedroom, I guess. The light switch didn't work. That was the room where I had seen the thing in the window. I mean in the ice. The reflection. I stood right there in that spot, looking out like *it* had looked out.

On the other end of the hall was Chrissy's room. They'd kept it just like it was when she lived in it, kept it like that all the years after. Her dolls and everything. Except that was where Mr. Mahaffey had started the fire, right there. The black charring hadn't been painted over or anything. The trusses had been stiffened up above with two-by-fours so the roof there wouldn't collapse, but Leonard still had to have a couple of pans on the floor for leaks. I didn't stay long in there.

I sat on their sofa for a while. I don't know what I thought about. Maybe I was waiting for the house to feel different from any other house. I mean, think of all that happened there. The whole family was gone now. But it just felt empty and dirty. If anyone asked, I would tell them, Yeah, it felt like Chrissy wasn't there anymore.

But no one ever asked. Not everyone in town who remembered the accident was even alive anymore. It was a long time ago. The stuff got moved out, and the house got torn down, and three new houses got built on the Mahaffey's lot, and the fields were sold to someone else, people who weren't even farmers.

And now I'm real old. What people say now is that there was a family a ways back whose little girl wouldn't let them leave the house after she died, and I guess that's what the Mahaffeys sure thought. But I wonder sometimes. I think about that gray light I saw in the windows once, and the not-really-human thing that looked out, and the sights that Leonard said he was made to see, the ones that scared him so much. I remember saying to Ethan Lutt once back when we were still in grade school, it was down at Donnycake Stream, I said to him, *Do you think there's really aliens in outer space and they come here sometimes?* and he said, *Oh yeah, they come right here and they study us real close, and you can't move till they're all done, and I have proof.* And I said, *What proof? You don't have any proof!* And he said, *Look at the colors they leave behind,* and he pointed at the water, and there were these little swirling rainbows on the surface where the water came up to the bank. But even as a little kid, I knew that was just oil runoff down the hill from the body shop.

I think about that day. No one ever looked into the whole bad business that hard. Not me, definitely. There was just too much else to do every day. Time goes on. Anyway, I think life is just like Reverend Abe said it was back when I was in Youth Service Squires. It's this big book of happy stories and sad stories, and you have to know both kinds to figure out what it all means. What happened to the Mahaffeys was definitely a sad story, and I have told it to you the best I could.

Traces

MAY BILLINGS

My name is May Billings. My father, Rourke, never wanted to make the recordings I am presenting here. But after some controversy involving two books he wrote long ago, *The Untold Story of Seacrist School* and *The Spinning Boy: A Small Town Legend*, his publisher demanded that he keep some sort of journal of everything he saw and did as part of his research for a book called *Dark Heart America*, consisting of his essays about exploring some of the country's strangest or most haunted places.

He was angry he had to make these recordings, because he felt he was being passively accused of shoddy research. Maybe some of it *was* obtrusive or unverifiable. I've deleted all his private rants on this issue from the fifty hours of audio he generated over his many years trying to complete his book. What's left here is a short sampling of the more unusual moments he had out there on the road. The book was never finished.

I confess, there's nothing but sad profit motive for releasing these recordings now. But I do feel they serve another purpose, which is to at least partially justify my father's efforts and endless nights travelling across the country. In this crude audio, I hear a man who very much believed in his work... and sometimes, maybe even evidence that someone else *needs* to pick up where he left off.

1.

ROURKE BILLINGS

(speaking into a portable voice recorder throughout this collection)

I have a new game, I call it *What's the Dealbreaker?* Every time I check into one of these fleabag motel rooms, at first glance everything seems fine but it's just a matter of time before the dealbreaker reveals itself. Will the TV turn out to be broken, will the shower curtain be missing, will the pillows smell like swamp water?

Here in this place tonight, for some reason the bad paintings, instead of hanging where they once seemed to, were lined up on the carpet leaning against the wall. Turned out they were covering an enormous gouge in the wall, comes up past my knees. Big enough to crawl through right into the next room. It's dark in there because the desk place says this place is going out of business on Tuesday.

I don't even know where I am. There was a cemetery I passed called Mahogany Glen... maybe that's the name of the town too. Just passing through. Cheers.

He pours himself a drink.

2.

Driving slowly along a long gravel path:

All right, this is interesting; there's only one way to actually enter Robin Song from the south at the moment because of some kind of a washout, there's a detour right through the big town cemetery here. You have to turn into it and follow the path all the way through it for like half a mile, how bizarre. There's graves on the left, graves on the right...

Whoa, this really is a big cemetery. Mount Halcyon, it's called. It looks like this is going to eventually connect me pretty much close to Cedar Road. Well, okay, nice welcome to town. 'Sorry you have to drive through the graveyard...'

Later:

Seems like a perfectly okay little town. I just ate lunch at this place Sam and Mam's, pretty good pancakes, the nice fluffy dark brown pancakes I like. Frankly, there's so much stuff about Robin Song, it's impossible to tell what stories are reliable and what are total garbage, but at least we have something that's real recent to check out.

Later:

So the house here is in a weird spot, you can kind of see why it was chosen.. it's all by itself down, ah..... Rosanda Road. The women who rented it did it right through Airbnb, it was one of these deals where you never actually have to see or deal with the host. There's a combination lock instead, so they checked in and then they started... dancing.

Um... okay, so I'm going to stop recording now, because the less you know about how I'm going to get inside, the better, right?

Later:

Well, the good news is that the owners haven't done anything to fix the place up yet; this is the best possible time I could have come. There's still very small traces of blood on the floor that match up to the pictures. Two different places. So they danced right here, in the main room here. It's real small, just the one window. Four of them, and on the west wall, the writing hasn't been touched. Which is freaky because anyone can just walk right up outside, look into the window, and see this. The curtain wasn't even closed when I came in. 'IF THERE IS NO ONE LEFT ALIVE HERE THEN GOD BLESS YOU ROBIN SONG WE HOPE YOU ARE FREE.'

This seems to have been based kind of on the old Bulgarian tradition called Kukeri, which is a dance ceremony still practiced today to ward off evil spirits, but this went much further. And there doesn't seem to have been any music involved here. When the bodies were found, there was no sound system here and no one was wearing any headphones or earphones. I have to think they're eventually going to find evidence that someone else was in here with them. What I really need to see is the autopsy pictures, I need to see their feet, I need to see the level of emaciation, but that's gonna be tough.

I don't understand how you can keep dancing until you collapse, and then you have the discipline to just lie there and die by dehydration? In someone else's house, with the faucet right in the room next to you?

There's a whole book here, in Robin Song, it's almost overwhelming. There's five places I could hit just today.

3.

I'm in Gullis, it's.... God, half past two in the morning, but I wanted to make sure there was no one else around. I'm standing on the pier in front of the cannery. This is where people say the Stumbling Man lives. He has a bunch of other names, but that's the one I got the most response to in town today. I like this story because it's one of the few local legends outside Ellawyd that I think has actually done economic damage to a place. They cannot do *anything* with this property. I'm looking across the bay here; this is good waterfront, but the town is just getting worse every year, so we have this sign on the side of this place, here we go: CANNERY VIEW, COMING SPRING 2019. That's two and a half years ago now. EXPERIENCE LUXURY LIVING OFF THE BEATEN PATH, but there is no sign that any construction was ever even attempted. The building is so far gone, I'm not even sure how they could have converted this into some livable place.

Every time the wind picks up, you can see some kind of general dust rising off the top... it kind of curls up into the air, very spirit-like. It's all coming from inside. All the windows are gone, they're so broken there's virtually no glass left. I don't know why it's still standing. It's real tall. The thing is, there's no fence. Apparently there's been a fence on and off over the years, but now I was just able to walk down the pier all the way to the end here and there's nothing keeping anyone out.

Later:

It looks like I may not be able to get above the third floor, because blocking the turn in the stairwell here is a piano. It's an old ruined piano, tilted upright. Somebody's spray-painted LET THE DEAD REST on it. (*He plays a couple of discordant keys.*) They must have pushed it in here from this side door, which is locked. They couldn't possibly have gotten it up the stairs, so I guess it was always here somewhere, back from the early days.

I could get over it, maybe...

Later, inside:

I'm, ah, trying to use the flashlight sparingly because I don't want to attract attention, but it's hard, there's virtually no moonlight coming in. Even down here on the third floor you see the scarring from the explosion in '87, there's no mistaking that's what this is. This one wall here is specked and chipped all over, a big black pattern like a snake with two heads.

A strange laugh is heard in the distance. Then silence.

That was...I don't know. A squatter...?

Later, almost drowned out by the sounds of rushing water:

You can probably hear that, I think I'm below ground now... Yeah, I'm underneath the dock. What's happened is, at some point this all totally flooded, there's like a river flowing through... oh, this place is so far past hope. It's a huge cement cavern, and a river is just coming right through.

Walking along the river:

Oh God, there's... the tops of three posts are sort of still sticking up from the water. Looks like three wooden posts tilted because of the force of the water. They look a little bit unnatural. The first thing you think of is the crucifixion. I don't know what those would have been, but they're going down slowly, under all this water.

4.

What Telford did was... I see this now, they tore down the original school entirely after the disaster, and they built the new one just a few hundred yards away. So it's like they just picked up the whole property and shifted it, so I am now standing on the place where the sinkhole opened up, and just through the trees, there is the new football field, and the building past that. Very simple solution.

The figures in the memorial here are pretty much as tall as I am. And yeah, there's about seventy, eighty of them. And they have no faces, there's just smoothness where faces should be. They're all these faceless stone people in graduation gowns, even though some of the people who fell into the hole weren't students. You can just stand right here in the middle of them if you want, it's very peaceful. They're all facing west, so when the sun sets in a couple of hours they'll be looking towards it, but all their heads are turned to the right and tilted upward a little, so the effect is that these faceless people have suddenly heard something or seen something, all of them at the same time, and they're reacting.

I can see why people hate this memorial at all, it's just chilling. The ground's been fortified of course, what we have now instead of grass is packed stone.

Walking from place to place:

But up here is the reason why the memorial is so controversial, and I really am amazed at the guts it took to do this. There's this marble stand right up here... the marble stand has, like, a pen and ink sketch, it's under glass now to protect it from the elements. Black and white. All it shows is... it looks like... from the point of view of the ground, it's looking up toward one of the corners of the roof of the old Telford High building, and in the sky above it, there's just... looks like hundreds, hundreds of birds. They're all on their way somewhere, and the attribution below it, kind of etched into the marble here... this was done by Garrett Markish. He had submitted this drawing to the school's biannual art journal. This was long before he became infamous. There are still people who believe his suicide that day somehow caused the disaster... but this woman on the school board petitioned to include his sketch in the memorial; she wanted to memorialize his tragedy as a disturbed kid who wasn't accepted, but he had this beauty inside him. I forget how she put it. There's a video of her in front of the school board saying it. It's as haunting as the sketch is. But the sketch is pretty good, I will say.

But overall, it's just... does there have to be seventy of these people? I mean, yes, that's how many died, but does there have to be one for every single... the effect is... it's just grim.

5.

Standing at a microphone before a small audience:

Let's, um... I can answer a couple questions if you have them. Yes?

QUESTIONER: Was there ever a time doing all this when you felt... like you were really, physically terrified for yourself?

Yeah. Ah... I went to Lenore about seven months before the cult murders broke out. No one was quite sure what was going on. The cults seemed to keep to the fringes out of town, but whatever they wanted was in Lenore, that seemed clear. You just knew that somewhere in Lenore, they were moving around without being seen. So I went and I tried to explore, but I was told no one was going to tell me anything, which was true. The place had an awful vibe, but I believe almost no one knew what was happening below the surface at that time. My friend, the psychic Morris Brand, who died last year, said to me that in a place like that, to find the truth, you have to go where not even the rats would think of going.

So on the second day, I sort of slipped into this abandoned building I'd noticed. Duckpin bowling, looked like it had been closed for years. All the lanes were ripped up. I went up these stairs to the second floor, into this hallway. I heard something up where it crossed with another one, and I got behind a post. All the way down the hall, some man went past. He had his right hand curled, wrapped around some woman's hair, and he was dragging her by it. She was lying on the floor, she was completely limp. I guessed she was dead. He was dragging her like her body weighed nothing, like he was just moving some trash, and then... out of sight, into the other hall. And I came out from behind this post and I stood there for.... I don't know. I didn't know what to do.

Then I heard this... shriek. The woman came around the corner, running at me at full speed. She was screaming with rage, at *me*. Her eyes were wild, her hands were out like this... She was going to rip me apart with her bare hands. I thought I was gonna die. And from around the hall, it must have been the man who yelled out one word to her, he yelled *Forbidden!* And she stopped in her tracks, just like that. She was breathing like this, you know... she would have done something unthinkable to me.

I ran for it, I ran for the stairwell. I got out of the building, and there was no one on the streets so I kept running. I never went back to Lenore, so I can't tell you about any of what happened after, just what happened to me in that hallway.

6.

The Strongbone Road. How do I describe this place? A couple of years ago I was at the memorial to the people who were killed in the sinkhole accident in that town in Missouri; this one is still

recognizable, sort of, if you know what you're looking for. It's snowing a little here, and it's a stunning visual. The landscape is this gray open void, perfectly flat.

I think it's beautiful, actually. Standing back where the hikers who eventually died must have stood before they started walking, you get this sense of... I don't know, two things: first, that it's absolute insanity to walk into such a vast nothingness, but second, that it's a really, really attractive thought. To just start walking and know you're never going to see anything, just keep putting one foot in front of the other, and no one can find you, none of your problems can follow you, it's just you and your body, and no past and no future. You're just... I don't know. It was creepy, but for a good five minutes there I wanted to do it.

Later:

I don't believe what I'm seeing. There is an *ostrich* up ahead. It keeps moving away from me. It's moving exactly as fast as I can walk, and whenever I start to run, it runs too, so I can't seem to get any closer, and I have no idea how there can *possibly* be an ostrich out here. Is it a mirage or something? It seems to be really filthy, like it crawled through an oil spill. One of its legs keeps buckling as it goes... yeah, that literally is an ostrich. The sinkhole's about a quarter mile behind me and I don't want to keep going because it's true, there are no visual cues anywhere about which direction you're actually walking, so I'm letting it go.

Now I think it's just looking at me, like, '*Come on, come on, follow me...*'

Look how *big* that thing is...

Later, indoors:

I'm at the hotel in Fort St. John. I'm doing some reading here on my laptop. Here's something I never knew:

'Some early French occultists promoting the esoteric Tarot included in their decks, instead of The Hermit, a card referred to as The Ostrich. The great bird, often drawn ragged, injured, or covered in filth, was presented as a symbol of an uninvited or accidental glimpse into the ghost world. Use of the Ostrich did not survive into the Major Arcana of the Tarot of the late 19th century.'

7.

Trudging across the sand with harsh wind whipping all around, waves crashing on a remote beach:

Hello?

Hello...?

Hello...?

Later:

I'm in the Braid. It's way past midnight. There's been these faint splashes of light on the sand, but every time I come around the corner of a dune to see where it came from, there's no source, it's just dark. This has happened three times now. It's like someone is trying to get me to follow them, but doesn't want to show themselves.

I'm just going to crouch here and see if it happens again. It was very soft yellow light, it kind of crawls up the side of a dune and then vanishes again. It kind of taunts me. There's gotta be someone out here with a light.

The last disappearance here was three years ago. This is the first time I've ever had a gun with me anywhere. I think I must be getting old and afraid.

8.

Stalled in traffic:

You know what I just cannot get enough of in life? Mysterious backups on I-95.

When you think about it, this road plays a bigger part in people's lives, at least in the east, than some of their friends or their distant relatives. It's an all-powerful daily force for the entire eastern seaboard of America in dozens of ways, but nobody's ever written a book or made a movie about I-95. Ten more movies about serial killers on cable today, but not *one* about the phenomenon that millions of people experience and complain about every single day. *That's* what I should be writing about.

OK, since I'm stuck here for no apparent reason I'm looking on Amazon to see if there *is* a book about I-95... Oops, I was wrong. There's four of them.

Later:

I finally got to Blaine Fountain here. Thank god I ate something back in Temperanceville because there is nothing in this town. I have no strategy but to just walk around and see if I can't feel what Morris Brand is talking about. When I saw him in June, he was very insistent I come here. He sent me some clippings and some stats; I don't know if they're very reliable, but if they are, something is strange. The people here are very into attacking each other for no reason...

Oh here, gee, I could have eaten at a Subway hooked to a gas station, so there I am lying again. Lots of dining options in Blaine Fountain!

Later:

All right, I had a few very uninteresting conversations with people in town. Not much material there, but this little kid who was getting a haircut said to me, really out of nowhere, 'You should walk around Mars!' And I said, 'What's Mars?' Mars is what his friends call this big open stretch of

nothingness here off something called Greentown Road, this skirts one entire side of the town. It's this massive area of boring fields, kind of reminds me of when the golf course in my old neighborhood got sold and it was left to go wild, except nothing seems to be growing very well here. The kid did mention there's some strange old house on a hill; I kind of want to find that. What this looks like is.... man, if I was a kid and I lived near hundreds and hundreds of acres of something like this, with no fencing, we'd go wild. But the barbershop kid said nobody ever plays here because it's scary. I don't know about scary, it's just a little sad.

Later:

Yeah, I'm at the top of this hill... I see what the kid was talking about, here's... I don't know, some vaguely historic-looking heap of wood, not exactly a house. It was a pretty big structure once, but it's rotted away. I'm going to say, just because it looks like there were some sections once, very well defined sections, that these were... stables, maybe?

Anyway, so here I am standing in a massive emptiness, with no good information about anything, and the only eerie thing I'm experiencing is that I can't get that 'America' song, the Simon and Garfunkel song, out of my head for some reason. It got in there and I started humming it a little as I was walking, and now it's a serious earworm.

Later:

It's seven o'clock. Somehow I was wandering around this tract for an hour and I got real sleepy all of a sudden, and I laid down on an incline and I slept way too long—but that's not weird, the driving does that to me, driving in the sun and squinting, it just takes it out of me.

There's a lot to this tract, just no sign of any human presence coming through. I *cannot* get that 'America' song out of my head, is it just called 'America'? I need to get back in the car again just to get something on the radio to replace it, my *God...!*

Later:

Yes, it's night, in case you can't hear those crickets. I stuck around because... I don't know, there's definitely a feeling here. I sort of got the same feeling from Seacrist, but that was just an empty building with a tangible sense of history; this is... here it's like there's a silent energy in the air all around me, like there's life here somewhere but I cannot find it, like someone's always behind me and no matter how fast I turn around I'll never be able to catch them. And then I got lost, but in getting lost, I came across something interesting. There's a couple of people, their names are... ah... God, I've forgotten already, hold on, let me get my book out...

Jill and Kurt. They're a brother and sister, they're professors and they're camping out here for a couple of nights, but when I asked them why *here*, they were a little evasive, they said they liked backwoods camping... but you can't call this place backwoods. There *are* woods, but they're very thin and spread out. They seemed loaded up with electronics for a camping trip... I came right out and told them about the book. They didn't seem very interested, and they claimed they didn't know anything about the area.

I think at least one of them was lying for some reason. The guy, Kurt, was definitely a little odd. He was wearing some handmade thing on his head, some crown of leaves or something, and there was kind of a delay between when I asked him something and when he answered me.

Something happened when I was talking to them, I swear to God this happened. The woman—God, why can't I remember her name?—she asked me a very simple question, where was I from, and I started to say I lived in Connecticut, but what came out was a 'I live in Saginaw'... because it's mentioned in the Simon and Garfunkel song. I think I need to get out of here and find a motel.

Playing this last part back, the words 'I think I need to get out of here and find a motel' are unnaturally slowed, heard at half speed.

Later, walking hurriedly:

All right, something is going on here with the electromagnetic field. My watch stopped, my fillings hurt like hell, and the last couple of recordings, I listened back... they speed up, they slow down, I don't know what's going on... but more importantly, I am lost. I saw some headlights far away and I was walking toward them, because everything was telling me that was Greentown Road. Now the headlights are gone—

Playback at half speed:

—and I have no idea where I am. It's probably—

Playback at double speed:

—I'm gonna guess almost 9:30.

Playback back to normal speed:

Yeah, this place needs more thought. Not the town, screw the town itself, it's these *fields*, it's *Mars*.

Later:

COUNTING THE CARS ON THE NEW JERSEY TURNPIKE!!
THEY'VE ALL COME TO LOOK—

Playback at half speed:

—FORRRR AMERRRRRRICAAAAAA
ALL COME TO LOOK FOR—

Playback at even slower speed:

—AMERRRRRRRICAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

9.

Here's what happened to me tonight. I didn't want to drive all the way through to Minneapolis with this snowstorm coming, so I stopped here in Latimer, Iowa. I checked into a Motel Six. There's a dive bar down the road. I walked over there, had more than a few. I was talking to this guy; I told him what I did, I always do, you never know who's gonna have a story. He says *Hey, do you know where you are?*

Turns out Latimer—and he says this to me with weird pride—Latimer is the northernmost point where they searched for Kan-Al Flight 111 when it vanished. That's it, that's the whole fact.

I left there at two, and I was staggering back down the road in the dark trying not to slip on the ice. There was a vast ugly smokestack wasteland off the road, but it was lit up like a city, a glittering city of steam and incandescence. I stopped and just marveled at it. I couldn't turn away. And this image played out in front of me, it came entirely from my imagination and because I was drunk.

I saw the faintest essence of the shape of that plane, totally quiet, not making a sound. I saw it glide low over the smokestacks. All the windows were dark but the little white beacon lights on the wings were blinking, and in their glow I got an instantaneous glimpse of part of the airline logo and some meaningless number markings on the tail. It glided from right to left, silent... then it was gone. Just me freezing by the side of the road.

And I got this feeling I've never had before. It was a black terror, not of finding out that any one of these things is truly supernatural, but of suddenly perceiving a *design* behind them *all*, a terror of some moment when I might actually look too hard through the gauze and see that it all has intention, and... connection.

I stumbled back to the motel and I dug out *Transcriptions of Markings Found Within the Tomb of the Witch Gaspard Signac*. I have it with me, I've never cracked it open. I paid two thousand dollars for it back in New York, but I took it outside to this steep embankment on the edge of the motel property and I threw it down there, into the tall weeds. And I stood there in the dark until my fingers began to sting from how cold it was, and I came back in here. And a half hour later, I tried to get down the embankment, and get it back. I almost broke my leg trying.

10.

Completing my third turn through Grenza. It's official—there is *no* one here. This place must have gone full ghost town just in the last year. You can sort of see the progression when you look at some of the houses. This place is not coming back. This is not like Lenore or Ellwyd; this is total abandonment. All because of a legend. Nobody's even bothered to fake a photo or a video of it, it's not interesting enough. It's not even a *killing* legend, it's just people walking. People... walking.

I don't know, maybe that *is* worse somehow.

Later.

Ah God, I *knew* this was gonna happen... I specifically yelled at myself to *not* let this happen. The car is stuck. I slid off the road headed out of town and I've just been spinning the wheels for ten minutes... no one who can give me a tow locally is answering... and if I want AAA to come do it, they

say it could be three hours. This is *fabulous*. I don't even know if I have enough gas to run the heat for three hours, I don't think I do.

So my options now are, what, I can wait here in the car for someone to come around the curve here and ram into me and *kill* me because my back end is sticking out and it's a total blind spot, or I can abandon it and walk back a mile back into town with no hat and no gloves because I left them in that diner in Elkins, and then when I get there, what? Break into a house? I cannot *believe* this!

Why do I *do* this? My mind is just... when did I get this stupid? So great, I'll just stare through the window until I freeze to death. I'll appreciate night in Grenza.

God!

I dreamt about the ostrich last night. It was looking at me through my window. That was the whole dream. It had crept up and just wanted to see in.

I can't *do* this anymore! I can't do this anymore, it's driving me crazy!

All of this, *stop! Stop!*

I want to go *home!*

Turning around in his seat:

What is that..?

What is that?!

He opens the car door, hurries out into the snow. His footsteps are heard running away. For a long moment, the only sounds are the wind and the idling engine. But then, other footsteps, slower, more methodical, approach and pass the car. Not just one set of feet moving through the snow, but several of them.

Devils Everywhere You Turn

BARB SOLOMON

When I was young, it felt like my father knew the answers to everything. So one day I asked him about a science word I heard when I was watching TV: 'Enterpy.' He said, 'Yes, that's entropy. That's when big complicated things that should be holding together fall apart. They fall everywhere.

But it's nobody's fault.'

We hear the sounds of the small town of Claysmith late at night: crickets, wind, a lone dog barking.

SHERIFF PAT SOLOMON

Doing go-rounds on Sunday nights, it was real quiet in town. Driving around, almost no calls would ever come in. So it was just me behind the wheel, street after street. I had too much time and quiet to think, really. I didn't even listen to music or anything. And then Mitzi from the detention center told me that one statistic she knew—she loved to hit me with funny statistics, and that one never got out of my head on Sunday nights.

MITZI

I got it off the internet or something, so maybe someone just pulled it out of their orifices, I don't know, but it was something like... if you took the population of any town and divided by some number, you were guaranteed that a certain number of houses in the middle of the night had something totally awful and terrible and illegal going on. Just basic math. But I said, 'Pat, you have to take a joke, baby!' He took everything so seriously. That man was wired *tight*.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

So somewhere in Claysmith, on Sunday night, you could safely say three houses were definitely hiding something kind of unthinkable, that's what that meant. Some violent secret thing. You just couldn't ever tell which houses they were, even though I knew the town as well as anybody. I guess I went right past them for hours. Sometimes I'd see a light in a window, and images would go through my mind. It was a made-up fact, maybe, but it didn't need to be technically true to bother me.

SHARON, RESIDENT OF CLAYSMITH

I got pulled over on High Street for no brake lights, which you know, was really frustrating. It was like the one cop in town, he saw me, he pulled me over, probably because he was just bored, I don't know. Me and Kev were kind of... we were kind of fighting a little. A couple minutes pass, it was like three minutes after we said goodnight to the Mr. Lonelyhearts cop... so we're driving away, and we were talking about how in the world was I gonna pay this ticket... and there goes walking down the side of the road some guy pushing something on a hand truck, this hand truck with two wheels and big tires—we use 'em all the time at G & G, scoot boxes around the warehouse, you know. Like this guy was making a delivery or something in the middle of the night, it was real late. Big, tall thing.

And Kev keeps hassling me, but then he stops and there's this funny silence and then he goes, 'Did you *see* what that guy was pushing?' You know, I should mention that by the time we were talking about this, we had passed... like, time had passed, right? And I kind of laughed, it was so weird, I kind of forgot Kev was such a moron for a minute, 'cause this thing had to be mentioned straight up. And I was like, 'Yeah, I *think* I saw what he was pushing, but *that* can't be right.' It was like we had a delayed reaction.

I... I thought it was a prop from some Halloween thing. That's would anybody would think if they were normal because Halloween had been a couple of days before. Never in a zillion years would *anybody*, right, any average person, what have you, I don't know...

GLEN, RESIDENT OF CLAYSMITH

Where my house is, we're all lined up in the back on an alley. It's pretty nasty, there's a couple of condemned places. It's really just a dirt track barely big enough to get your car down to your place, or walk your dog. My bedroom window looks down on part of it. So when I can't sleep, I'll sit at my desk in there and I'll write... well, porn frankly, that's what I was actually doing, round about midnight. And I saw the guy pushing that contraption down the alley, he had a wheeled, um... the thing UPS guys use, a hand cart thing. First I figured it was a piece of furniture, but it was so big he kind of had to let the back of it rest against his shoulders as he pushed, otherwise maybe it would get imbalanced. He was definitely struggling a little.

So I was watching this, and then I finally realized what it was. I can't sit here and pretend I was gonna raise any alarm bells or anything, because what am I gonna say if I call the police? How am I gonna know what the laws are about owning *that* kind of thing?

He pushed it right by, the alley dumps out on Conrack. So I guess he still had a ways to go at that point.

SHARON

We didn't really say anything about it, because what was there to say? We saw somebody with a Halloween decoration. Like, we're not gonna waste anybody's time with that. Yeah. So no, we don't feel any guilt about not saying anything.

I had a lot going on. I was trying to get my herbalist's certification.

MR. LERSCH, PHARMACEUTICAL REP

Let me explain the sequence of actual events in order so people perhaps finally understand. One: Mr. Dunker applied for the trial based on a recommendation from his mental health provider. Second: That recommendation went to the panel, and he was approved after the questionnaire and an examination, and the logs show he went through eight doses total between July and October, five milligrams each time, with all the proper fasting requirements met. There's no way for him to have abused the drug because it was administered *only* at the Chaney Lake lab site, and the records there were all found to be solid and accurate. Third: Our company takes procedures *very* seriously. In 2014 we were given the National Academy of Strategic Scientists' Award for Protocol Design. The wrongdoings came *strictly* from Port Biopharma. Four: Contrary to some people's belief, we did not possess, ah, the power to... to... *teleport* our *eyes* into the future and magically visualize their misconduct. Contrary to some people's apparent belief, no such, uh, uh, *magical teleporting device* existed at that time.

DONNY, WOODSHOP EMPLOYEE

Cy was just one of these people who puts on a perfect face for other people. There was nothing schemey about it; it's *adapting*. I think I was the only one at the shop who knew about the buttons and coins thing, he fought with that for a lot of years. You'd never think from talking to him that he had that problem, but his anxiety was pretty much overwhelming. You just saw this guy, this real friendly guy... outgoing, a climber, always in shape, liked people.... good boss... but it was like ten years he'd been fighting with that anxiety.

He explained it all to me once; he tried to go through CBT, cognitive behavioral therapy, but the way he described it, it was... it was *rough*, it was too rough for him. You'd never know how he was

trying to keep things together. You'd never know at a party that he was sweating it out inside because you accidentally rattled some quarters in your pocket, or you took some change out when you were paying the tab somewhere. Or you'd look up and notice Cy had left something real early, and maybe it was because someone had buttons lined up in a certain way on their shirt. You just wouldn't know. He was too proud to tell about it unless you drew it out somehow.

The human brain, man... I mean, what a *mess*.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

The stadium was always the low point of the circuit around town. I honestly disliked going there pretty intensely. Something about the place, as small as it was, it felt like a haunted house. But it had to be done, at least once a month or so, because there were so many ways into it that it invited transients or kids doing drugs, or something worse. I told myself, 'You gotta go in there right after Halloween.' The time we found a dead horse in there, fully grown dead horse, I got an alderman to yell for a barrier fence, but nothing ever happened. What was left of the bread factory had a fence, but not the stadium.

I had keys, so I went in the main entrance and I checked out the concourse. It was just a half a loop, but a lot of nooks and corners. Raccoons. And that big Claysmith City Kickers banner that no one ever had the interest to steal, probably because the league went bankrupt before the team even started. Some rain had come through about a half hour before, so there were these trickles of dripping water, coming down, like some cavern system. And then I walked outside into the bowl, and I did a visual scan from where I stood of the bleacher planks all around just to see if there were any, uh... anomalies which probably meant someone sleeping there.

I think it was the field that always spooked me most really. It was like an end-of-the-world kind of sight. They mowed only when they thought about it; the grass was up to my calves now. Something about the stadium, that grass and all that quiet... you know, for whatever reason, it always reminded me of... Jonestown somehow.

SHAY, PHARMA EMPLOYEE

Okay, so the honking bullsh-- starts when you have Port once again pressuring us to keep expanding the trial pool when all along we tell them, 'Look, Darth Vader, we can't *find* this optimal set of patients you're describing in the time frame you need; *no one* can, it doesn't *exist*. It reads great in your marketing materials, but you're eliminating too much of the set if you want to achieve reliable data.' So you wind up nuancing the qualifications and the questionnaire—dump *this* question, dump *this* question, and you keep doing that and bingo! You wind up with someone with previous damage to the mesolimbic pathway from a surgery when he was two, and only through x-rays are you going to see that's still there. So *that* should have been caught, and then you have probable evidence showing in the ventral striatum after the third five milligrams that his fu--ing dopaminergic signals are getting corrupted, and Darth tells you it's a statistical outlier and we'll examine it closely when the trial is done. *No*, how about you pull him in for a real evaluation right *now* instead of nodding your heads like a bunch of fu--ing *parrots* when he tells you he's feeling fine, and maybe consider whether his very response to that question is *completely causal*.

But see, 'fine' is what they want to hear so Boba Fett can give everyone good news about the drug in their stockholders meeting. But what am I supposed to do when this is so fu--ing chronic? Be a *hero*? Tell my mother she has to move into a state home, we can't afford a private one anymore? Then try to explain why I left my last job to somebody *else* on the Death Star?

SHERIFF SOLOMON

I radioed Porter on schedule, pretty routine, and he let me know he'd seen something a little unusual some time before—this guy standing near the Salvation Army store, looking a little out of it. That was his exact description. He was dropping something into the storm drain, some little thing. And I asked Porter what the guy's story was.

Well, Porter didn't know. Porter hadn't pulled over and asked him any questions. I said, 'Porter, you're gonna be out here for hours every night, this isn't some place like Philadelphia, there's no reason to let *anything* slide.' And he said, 'Well, the guy had something on a hand truck, some cabinet or something, so obviously he was in the middle of doing *something*.'

Porter was about four months out of the academy. He was still in that false mode of thinking—he didn't know yet that you have to separate the *context* sometimes. He let that hand truck blind him. You have to think: What about the *person* am I seeing here? You see a brand new iPhone in Jack the Ripper's hand and he's sitting in Starbucks texting, he's still Jack the Ripper when he opens his mouth and you really look into his face.

FAITH, ONLINE DATER

I just thought I was one of the lucky ones probably. There were so many duds on that app. And here was this really charming, upbeat New Haven guy, owned his own business, made things for a living, and the one time we went out he was, you know, really fun, totally respectful. I didn't mind that he was divorced; everyone else was... he talked about it like he and his ex were pretty friendly. So I was sad he didn't call me back, I waited and waited, and it just wasn't happening. Not that I was going to fight it, because I know what it's like out there, I absolutely know about cold feet. I just thought we had enough of a connection that he'd call me.

And then he finally did, like a month later, pretty much out of the blue. And to him, he treated it like it was like only a few days had gone by. I said Sure, I'll go out again. His sense of time seemed like it was a little wonky, like he'd just kind of lost track. But considering who some of my girlfriends wound up with on that app, these guys with their Batman Lego sets, he was pretty much a dream.

DONNY

Maybe I was the only one who really noticed him changing, but I don't know, that kind of seems hard to believe. But he started to seem kind of secretive. He was spending a lot more time in his office, and now the door was closed sometimes for some reason. This was a guy who practically pioneered the open-door thing. A lot of time on the internet, that's what it seemed like, you know. A lot of internet secrecy during the day. He still kept to his usual schedule pretty much, but now he wasn't helping us out on the floor. That was always something he kind of dug. It was pretty amazing to watch him put something together, he knew his stuff.

The other thing that sunk in quick was that when you were talking to him... okay, he would get this super intense look of concentration on his face. Usually when you talked to Cy he was kind of smiling and nodding helpfully, right, but now he would almost twist his face to follow what you were saying, almost like a little puppy does, he'd tilt his head... like that cartoon moose from the cereal commercials.

I'm trying to do it but it seems stupid when I do it. His, uh... *features* would scrunch up, you know. Then it would pass. I just couldn't put my finger on what was going on.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

There was a Chevy Impala on the side of the road with the driver's side door wide open and the flashers on, the side of Thickwhistle Road. There's absolutely nothing around that area, just a pig farm a mile up. There's a lot of woods. A *lot* of woods. I took a look around and then I ran the plates. I recognized the name that came up. Garth Rizzo.

That was interesting. He was in Toastmasters with me for a little while. I'd been out to his house a couple of times on domestic calls. It was his son who called in both times, to tell us his dad was beating on him. Sad. The kid was twenty-two, twenty-three. Garth Rizzo was that kind of guy.

I tried to start the car. The keys were still there, but it wouldn't turn over. Not enough electrical power. Everything was pretty much gone except the headlights and the flashers, which were real weak, and the radio would play for about ten seconds and then die. So I figured his alternator had started to conk but he kept driving, maybe trying to get all the way home, which would have been about two miles away still. Since it was so late, I thought it meant maybe he was drunk in the bargain. Then I noticed that the headrest on the driver's seat, the cushion, was partially dislodged from the post, like someone had tried to yank it out.

ERIC, EX-AUTOMOTIVE EXECUTIVE

We'd call it 'sustainability of the delivery chain.' That was the magic blame phrase, meant absolutely horsesh--. We'd use that as the reason we couldn't procure decent parts for the alternator, but the reality was, it was pretty much planned to fail at a certain mileage mark. The alternator, the fuel pump, the water pump. We had a ten-year contract with Convexity Midwest to supply the parts to the car care centers, so of course those parts couldn't last. My whole job was more or less shopping for parts you could always get from suppliers at an obscenely low price, didn't depend on any kind of improvement cycle getting in the way of pure crapitude.

So when your car broke down on your way to grandma's, guess what? That was me, sitting in my office, calculating your fate on a spreadsheet. That was my 'light cyan' column, I always loved coloring in the little cells in Excel. That never got old. That's what I left teaching for.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

I figured I'd just go right down to Garth's and see if he'd wound up home. I'd been there one time, for a New Year's thing. I went up on the porch, knocked a couple of times, and the door kind of opened in by itself, no one seemed to touch it. It was dark inside but there was a deep red light somewhere. It was so powerful it up the hallway. And like in a dream or a movie, this shape came around the corner, just a total silhouette of a man in all that red light. Wearing a cape, clearly, with a big collar, you know, that very classic vampire look. This person walking toward the door, verrrrrrry slowly. Like nothing I could have expected.

Then I saw it was Spencer, Garth's kid. Skinny kid. He had his hair slicked back, his face looked pale. Maybe some makeup to get it that way. And he told me, uh... it was only a game, some internet game he was playing, but he kept on talking like someone much older, much wearier. He didn't want to break character or something. So it was a little unnerving, because I wasn't sure exactly who I was talking to.

He told me his dad had never come home that night. He didn't seem surprised. Garth had been seeing some woman recently. I really wanted to give this kid a shake and say, 'Come on, I need to talk to the real Spencer, please.' But he was... immersed.

I could have asked to come inside, but I didn't quite have cause yet. And when we were done our exchange there, he turned and drifted back into the light and out of sight, just as slow as he'd come. Probably being whatever he was supposed to be was much better than being Garth Rizzo's son. I've seen a lot of that.

DONNY

Cy called me in to talk about something... I think it was a bed frame that was going to be next to impossible to get done on time. But almost right away he got off that topic and he said to me... we were sitting just like we are now, you know, he was behind his desk... he said, 'Let me ask you something. Have you ever done anything really, really terrible that nobody would understand?'

And I said, 'Uhhhh...' I don't know exactly what I said. I mentioned being really mean to someone in Boy Scouts once who totally didn't deserve it, I just picked a fight with him for no reason whatsoever, bloodied up his lip pretty bad. Cy wanted more and more details though.

I asked him what this was about and he said, 'Think of the worst being, the worst monster in the world. It would be the devil, right? It would be Satan.' And I said, 'Yeahhhhh...' He said, 'Theoretically, if he was inside one of us, how would that person know? How would you know if you were Satan?'

I'm pretty sure I laughed. But it's your boss, right? You're not going to talk to your boss in certain ways, even if you're friendly. So I play along, even though I'm getting really confused. He looked like he had a big idea about this, so I kept throwing it back to him, I was hoping he would get me straight.

He said, 'I think if a person were Satan... he'd know because he could get away with the worst possible thing you could do and keep on going, right?' That sounded plausible enough to me, so I said so. He said, 'So you'd try to *do* that awful thing... and see if it felt good enough to keep going, and if absolutely no one could stop you... there's your answer, right? Does that sound right?' I forget the exact words, but it was something freaky like that. I said, 'Cy, I gotta know, what in the *world* is this about, you're weirding me out a bit.'

And there came that look that I was talking about. Like a.... like he was concentrating so hard it almost hurt. And then it passed. And he said something about... he had just been reading some philosophy book and wanted to know if I was into that kind of thing, he was just throwing it out there. But all that was over my head. Very weird, because we'd only really ever talked about sports or our kids or TV. Everything else I knew about him came from other people, or other places.

Anyway, we just sort of ended there and I went back to the floor, and he stayed in his office. Door closed again. That had become his normal.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

I drove back to Garth's car. I was gonna call for a tow if I had to. I was looking at the GPS a little to double-confirm there really wasn't anyplace for Garth to have gone to that wasn't a residence.

I popped the trunk, and really the reason was exactly what you might think, which is the one in a million chance you're going to find someone in there. Never happened to me, but you always take a breath before you open a trunk. But instead it was totally crammed with cardboard boxes. And inside those boxes were much *smaller* boxes.

CHARLES, LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICIAL

Pregnancy test kits are an item that happens to, ah, retain their pricepoint very well when they're sold illegally online, especially overseas. So we see them stolen from warehouses quite a bit.

Not as much as adult diapers, interestingly.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

Porter radioed me again. He'd just taken a call from Mota Street. Someone was saying they thought they'd heard a scream from the house next door and then everything had gone real quiet. So now they were worried. They admitted they'd waited a good half hour before calling. That wasn't too surprising. People tend to wait until the primitive part of their brains really starts crying out. I told Porter to swap places with me.

It was getting on toward two-thirty.

FAITH

We met at Rustic Steakhouse for our second date, and he was talking about very different things than the first time. A lot about stuff from my past he wanted to know about. Nothing too... invasive, just *strange*. It felt like he was trying to figure out if I might be a killer or something. He hadn't been like that on the first date.

Then he really got weird. He started to talk about how he had this big plan like nothing anyone had ever seen, and I was like... 'You mean a *business* plan?' And he said no, what he meant was... I don't know, he was talking about being more powerful than anyone in the world and he realized there was only one way to prove it, and unless he did it good and evil would get out of balance... I mean, really ludicrous talk, and it felt he was trying to make it into some puzzle I had to guess at, and I felt really uncomfortable with it. Then he asked me—this was only part of the way through dinner—he asked me to look into his eyes and tell me what I saw there, but it wasn't flirtatious or even nice. And I realized he was leaning forward like he was ready to spring across the table, but he was all 'Oh no, Faith, there's no reason to be afraid... you're going to be able to tell everyone who you encountered in this life,' and I got quiet after that. I made up some ridiculous lie about how I had to go. Really, totally unbelievable, but he bought it.

I think I was crying before I even got out of the restaurant. But I was more scared than sad at that point. I thought he was unhinged.

That was three years ago and I haven't dated since. I swear, it's like... having some lousy part-time job you have to keep dragging yourself to at night instead of relaxing, and every time you get your paycheck it's just forty cents. Or sometimes it's all zeroes, and then at the bottom someone actually wrote, 'You're worth nothing.'

FRANKLIN, TECH WORKER

I'll tell you how gullible people are—day one, we loaded the app up with fake profiles, one fake for every fifteen real ones. What they'd figured out was that people didn't mind getting no response to a hot person's profile; they were *used* to getting rejected by hot people. But if they didn't see enough of them in the feed, *that* was what they got disappointed by, *that's* where the cancel rate came. These autobot responses all had the same dopey pattern, but it was forever till someone actually called us out on it. We didn't even try hard with the photos, they were all from the last couple of search pages on the Serbian version of Photo Swan.

MURRAY, TECH WORKER

It was just laziness that got us found out. We kept accidentally giving all our hot people the same names. It was either, like, Zack or Sheridan.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

Cranberry was the nice side of town, there was some money in Cranberry. It was rare we got calls there. The neighbor who'd made the call was standing on her lawn in the dark. She raised her hand to me when I pulled up and pointed toward 146. We didn't have any kind of exchange beyond that, wasn't necessary yet.

I knocked on the door a few times, no answer. All the lights were off, so I walked around the side. The neighbor was watching me, she had this enormous cup of tea or something she had to hold in both hands. She'd bring it up to her mouth real slow and sip and watch me. I couldn't see her face.

The sliding glass door out to the porch was open. I took a step inside, called out. There were candles lit inside, it was the living room. There was a video camera set up, it was pointing at a table... and on the table was a Ouija board next to a bunch of *other* candles. Real classical setup there, except there was also a rubber tie-off and some cotton balls beside it. The needle that went with it had been left on a mantel. I kept calling and calling, and I walked through the house a bit but no one was answering. No one was in the bedroom, the kitchen.

The door leading into the kitchen from the back yard was unlocked too. It felt just a little bit greasy to the touch.

DONNY

Cy didn't come to work the day after Halloween, just sent us an email. So the last time I ever saw him I guess was... October 30th. When everyone went home on the 1st, I hung around for a while, there were these ridiculous arched door jambs I had to fit. And at some point I went out to one of the little storage units we have around the back of the shop. I went toward the back of this one unit we hadn't used for a while because of a flooding problem; I was looking a certain mullion shape. And there was all this stuff spread out on a big worktable, it looked like someone had set it up special. I thought, Well, this is a strange place for somebody to be working on something, why wouldn't they do this in the shop? So I... you know, obviously, I took a closer look.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

I figured out how to roll back the tape on the camera—or I guess it's not tape anymore, it's all digital, and I played it through the little screen on the video camera. There was an older guy sitting at the table there in the dark in front of the Ouija board. This was Mr. Worthy, and he was looking all around him and he was asking questions of nobody in particular. He definitely looked inebriated, or stoned is the better word. I let the video play while I kept checking out the room. I thought maybe I'd get lucky and hear something on it.

On the video he kept saying, 'Do you understand why I had to do it, darling?' ... he said that over and over so often I couldn't concentrate. I went to fast-forward the video, but it ended real quick. When I rolled it back a little, I got the sense he'd seen something in the far corner of the room he wasn't expecting, and he stopped what he was doing, and then... he'd gotten up from the chair and moved out of frame, and he'd just started to say something new when you could sense the weight of his steps on the floor jostle the camera a little, and you heard his hand tap it, and the recording stopped.

DONNY

Cy's sketches never looked like anybody else's, they were real distinctive because they were actually kind of bad—but he always had it all up in his mind, right, that's how good a carpenter he was, he didn't need sketches a lot of the time. They just looked to me like a lot of random joints and edges. All that was left of whatever he was building was wood scraps and some bolts, and he'd dragged a Workmate in. Except plain as day, right there on the rack next to it were these cut steel pieces, big. He'd put a black X on them with a grease pen. That's what you did in the shop to mark stuff to be recycled.

They didn't seem to mean much until you touched the bottom edges. They'd been sharpened and sharpened and sharpened. They were as sharp as you can possibly get without slicing your finger open just by touching one.

BARB SOLOMON

When I was twelve, the bread factory burned down, and my father came home with a burn on his neck that he thought was nothing to worry about, but it was a lot more serious than he realized. He'd risked his life that night. I remember stopping on my bike sometimes on the way to the Snack-and-Go and looking at the scary sagging ruins, and all that gray ash that took so long to finally blow away, little by little.

But it was how angry the people in town got with each other over who was to blame for the fire that actually scared me. Seeing Gary Fair get beaten up by a mob because of it was what finally got me to really start thinking about entropy.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

There were all kinds of little things in the living room that were confusing the picture. I noticed that the mirrors were taped over. There were two of them there in the living room, and they were done over real carefully in electrical tape. There was a Junction Bay alarm system in the house that was activated, but the sensor light was yellow. I'd only seen them green before. That stuck with me too.

I went out through the sliding glass door again and took a look at the grass outside under the roof light. And there you could kind of see it, if you squatted and looked at the right angle, because of the rains that night. There were what looked like drag marks. I was able to follow the traces out almost all the way out to the edge of the lawn.

MARY, JUNCTION BAY EMPLOYEE

Robert would do the installations, but that first test in front of the customer wasn't actually for the connection to the base; *that* had to be tested after the account for the phone line was confirmed. And of course the first one for 146 Mota failed because Robert usually has his head up his a--. But then I look at the account and I see the test signal went out 10:15 at night, and nobody wants to call the customer about a fail that late because they get all pissy. So what you do sometimes is just wait till the next morning. Because I figured, Well, it's the first test, what are the odds someone's actually going to trespass before we can get this fixed? But then 'cause of all the layoffs, it was just *me* that morning, and I have a million things to do... and then Big Round Boss comes out of his office and he's like, 'ME BIG ROUND BOSS, ME NEED YOU GET CAKE FROM SAFEWAY!' and I said, 'Seriously? We're doing Nisha's birthday when we have all this stuff we need to do we can't get to?' But I go, and it turns out Big Round Boss can't even spell Nisha over the phone right to the cake people, so

it reads HAPPY BIRTHDAY NITCHY, and I think 'Oh well!' But Big Round Boss sees it and goes 'ME BIG ROUND BOSS, YOU NEED SCRAPE LETTERS OFF!'

I have *work* to do. And then I *see* him in his office, he's using his disgusting nail clippers to try to do surgery on the letters. So I definitely couldn't have been happier that this guy made three times what I did.

PRE-RECORDED VOICE

You have accessed the E-Archiva Law Enforcement Media Database. Chapter E337P: November 6, 2023. 1840 hours.

Interrogation room audio:

DETECTIVE MENKIE

Okay, we can set the map aside for a bit. Do you want to tell us about Mr. Rizzo?

CY DUNKER

Well, I was driving down the road and I hadn't quite figured out a definite plan yet, and I saw the car stopped on the shoulder, and I looked around and I thought, Well, this is as good a chance as any. The guy was obviously alone, he was closing his hood. There was nobody else around, looked like kind of a deserted road. So I pulled over as close as I possibly could and I, ah, reached beside me and I took the taser off the passenger's seat, but I hadn't really thought of how to conceal it, so I really just had it in my left hand as I walked up. I said 'Hey, do you need any help?' And I saw how big the guy was and I thought, Okay, this could be tough. And the first thing he said to me was, 'I am gonna find the people who made this pile of pus and I am gonna shoot holes in every single one of them.' So I said, ah, 'What do you think the problem is, do you need a jump?' And he said, 'No, I don't need a jump! I need a new alternator, so unless you have one to give me, why don't you go screw your mother!' I thought, Wow. So I put the taser against his neck, and it worked better than I thought.

DETECTIVE MENKIE

What did it do to him?

CY

He fell to the ground, he kind of grabbed at the headrest of the driver's seat to break his fall. He was twitching and he kept saying *what what what* over and over again, like his mouth had got stuck in gear, and I tased him a couple more times and told him if he stayed still I'd stop. I'm not sure he even heard me by that point, I think I overdid it.

His arms were totally limp, so I laid him out kind of like a snow angel and got the zip ties on his hands and legs pretty quick, and I realized, you know what, I hope I can figure out how to use the lift gate on the truck, because this guy looks like he's tipping two hundred fifty pounds and I'd never used one before, and I forgot to read up on it at the shop. But I'd made sure to park with the truck's rear end right next to where he'd been standing, and they mark it on the dash very clearly, one button, all I had to do was roll him onto it more or less before anyone else came along, and that didn't turn out to be a problem. I knew there were fewer people in Claysmith than there used to be, I just didn't realize *how* few, I'd never been there.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

I closed up the house and did a quick circuit of the street, but I didn't see much sign of anything worth nothing. I told Porter to finish up with Garth's vehicle for now and start cruising again. I gave him the whole rundown of the situation at the house, but I couldn't be sure exactly what we were looking for. It was just a half-certainty that something was very wrong. I had the alarm company give me what information they could about the owner of the house, see if an alarm signal was sent, but he wasn't picking up his cell when I tried. So at that moment, he could have been anywhere. I couldn't believe that neighbor stayed out in her yard the whole time, she didn't want to go back in, I practically forced her to.

I thought about my daughter. She wasn't at home that night. She was doing a sleepover at a friend's house, her friend Jackie was very, very sick, uh... terminally ill, in fact. So she and another friend were sleeping over there... play games, cheer her up just a little. She was going back into the hospital for a while the next day. It wasn't something we'd normally ever let Barb do on a school night, but that was a special case.

There was absolutely no reason for me to think they weren't all safely asleep. Jackie's folks were there of course. It would have been ridiculous for me or my wife to suddenly call. But I really wanted to.

Interrogation room audio:

CY

I just happened to see the Junction Bay sticker in the window as I drove by, and based on my own history with Junction Bay and how skeezy they were, for lack of a better word, I thought, I bet those people have no security system at all, Junction Bay just unethically sold them a sticker. And that was how I decided on that house, pretty random. I walked around back to see if there was a door open, and there was. It was unlocked but I thought I still might have set off an alarm. It looked like there was a box next to it inside on a wall, but nothing seemed to happen. I strolled right in. Everything was really aligning just as I had wanted.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

I had to curve around the stadium on the east side to go toward Lancaster Road. There are a couple of spots where you have a pretty good glimpse of part of the field itself, but you have to be looking right there to notice it. I'd just been past so many times I knew those spots real well. I was moving past the stop sign on Mohican and I looked up and, suddenly—and you would have had to have seen that sight a thousand times to know anything was different in the slightest—I saw something on the field, a little blot. My first thought was that it was a person. I put the cruiser in reverse and I idled for a bit, I was just staring at it. The thing wasn't moving. Then what jumped out completely clear was that the big service doors on that side of the stadium had been forced inward.

Interrogation room audio:

CY

There was this old man in the living room. He was definitely surprised to see me. He said, 'You can't be here, it's too dangerous for you to be here.' He seemed very dazed, greatly under the influence

of some kind of drug or alcohol. He had to sit down again or he was going to fall right over. And I looked around at the Ouija board and the candles and so forth, and I asked him what he meant, and he said, ah.... he said, 'It's me she wants revenge on, but if you're here she could kill you too.' I asked him, 'Why have you blacked out the mirrors?' And he told me it was too easy for her spirit to leave the room through them, something like that, I didn't hear him perfectly clearly. I said, 'What did you *do* to this person?' But he wouldn't answer that, all he did was like this, he kind of slowly brought his hands up to his face and over his eyes like he couldn't bear to look at me.

I went up to him and I put the taser against his neck like the man before, but the reaction was different. He screamed very loudly so I had to hit him, and stamp on him so he'd stop, and then he just went completely limp, and I didn't think he was breathing. There was no sign of life, almost immediately. He was extremely light, so it was simple to just drag him out of there and across the grass and get him into the back of the truck. I was sure someone in the houses there would see me, but it never happened.

DETECTIVE MENKIE

Do you think he might have been dead?

CY

Yeah, I was pretty sure. I figured I could just leave him and go back inside and pull the tape off the mirrors, so I did that and then I went back outside.

DETECTIVE MENKIE

Why did you feel the need to do that?

CY

I don't know. It occurred to me that if this spirit he was trying to bring into the house was actually there, she would be trapped, I don't know how anything like that works, it just seemed like the right thing to do.

BARB SOLOMON

There's a thrill in sneaking out in the night with your childhood friends like nothing else in life. It's like swimming together in a dark sea of mystery and wonder. We'd gone where we'd never dared to go. We were excited to either be caught, or not be. We knew what we were doing was wrong, Jackie, Sonya, and I, but we wouldn't have given it up for the world. All we had were the clothes we had on and Sonya's book. The bread factory seemed impossibly far away, but we kept going. We were on an important mission. That's what we told each other.

Crossing Sunset Park, I spotted the man, far away, standing where the treeline stopped and the playground began. He was neither walking a dog, nor smoking, nor doing anything but watching us go past. Sonya said, 'Don't worry, there's three of us and only one of him,' and we began to giggle. Our nerves were frayed in a thrilling and terrible way. The man was careful to stand just out of the lamplight. One step in almost any direction, and he would be revealed. We had seen the box truck sitting in the corner of the parking lot.

He later said he wanted just one more murder that night—that the second one, the old man, had not felt right, and when he saw the three of us, he barely knew what to do. The possibilities were overwhelming. Things were coming together so beautifully for him. Chaos becoming order. Loose pieces on the ground rising and melding. A film reel of mangled bloody colors becoming a landscape.

He put his head in his hands, clutching it, trying to picture and feel it all. He was just too slow in figuring how to go about killing all three of us. The next thing he knew, we were gone in the dark.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

Those service doors were barely even chained, and it looked from some indentations that a vehicle had simply bumped up against them until the chains had snapped. There wasn't even a locking device, they were just looped over and over and knotted. The area inside there was empty and just big enough to drive something through. The doors on the other side of it were open too, same deal. Something heavy had struck them, but they weren't even chained. Opened right out in the open air through a gap in the fence that hugged the field all around. Couldn't have been simpler.

There it was, standing right at the midfield point, where the soccer teams would have kicked off if the league had ever started. It was about five feet tall, and it was actually light enough to rock back and forth with one hand if you were strong. If it had been much heavier, it couldn't have been moved with a hand truck too well, so he'd built it very carefully. I'd never seen one of these things up close except maybe in a museum when I was a kid. This was sort of the more shrunken version, I suppose.

Interrogation room audio:

DETECTIVE MENKIE

If you had room in the truck for it, why did you push it so far on the hand truck from where you first parked? Why not drive it right to the stadium?

CY

I didn't even know about the stadium when I first parked, I just wanted to look around for a place I felt good about. And I saw those bleachers way off in the distance, and I, ah, I liked this image of the whole little town filling up that little stadium, filing in to see, no talking or anything, just quiet, and watching me do what I did.

DETECTIVE MENKIE

But you didn't drive there.

CY

Well, part of it was, if I could push it on the hand truck all the way there and no one stopped me, that would be my affirmation that I couldn't be stopped at all, that would be a sign I was who I *knew* I was. And that turned out to be true.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

The bodies were lying just on the other side of it. He hadn't just rolled them away when he was done with them; there was some attempt at arrangement, some pattern I didn't understand right away.

Interrogation room audio:

CY

No, it was just that I had some trouble when I cut the electrical tape off their hands and their mouths, things got out of sorts.

What flavor of Snapple is this supposed to be?

SHERIFF SOLOMON

The basket was to the left of Mr. Worthy's arm. His arm was outstretched and his hand was actually touching it. Just a wicker basket from Walmart or someplace, nothing special.

Both of the heads were inside, sort of facing each other.

When I radioed the state police, I remember my mind had completely blanked on the actual word for what this big thing was. Just one of those moments, you hear a word a thousand times in life and obviously you *know* it, but suddenly it just won't come. And then it didn't come to me as a sound in my mind—it came to me as this image of tiles on a Scrabble board. That happens sometimes, I play with my wife a lot. There it was in the tiles. I can even tell you how many points it's worth. Guillotine. Eleven point score.

I was in year twenty-four of my career then. That may have been my first time as a police officer, looking down into that basket, that for some reason my very first sympathies weren't for the victims. Instead my first thought standing right there was, *Someone else has lost their immortal soul.*

That was getting older talking. I had this weird instant of sadness for some wretched total stranger, and then I went looking to find him.

BARB SOLOMON

Cy Dunker became disoriented and frustrated in trying to find the box truck again, veering mistakenly to the east. He eventually spotted a patrol cruiser in the distance, waiting at the railroad tracks where the mayor had been killed by a derailed freight car eight years earlier.

The cruiser picked him up in the headlights by another fluke of chance. When he saw someone getting out of it, he turned to the north. Very shortly, he realized he was finally being pursued.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

Porter did a lot of things wrong that night. Trying to cross that mud mess beside Temple Emmanuel in the cruiser was definitely one, which is how he got stuck and wound up on foot so soon. Some of it was bad training. Some of it was adrenalin and being young. He didn't know the town real well and didn't realize the Old Wooden City was a dead end, and he didn't have to go in there after Dunker. Once you got in there, it was difficult to navigate your way out unless you came back out through the front. But Porter did go in.

SERGEANT BRYLES

After the riots in Hartford, the department had two years of awful PR problems. We couldn't recruit officers no matter *what* we tried. No one wanted to be a cop. So the academy entrance standards fell off a cliff. If you had a face and could count to nine on your toes, you were in.

Interrogation room audio:

CY

There was this place up ahead and I was getting tired. Stange-looking place to me, but the officer was getting closer, so I made for it. I thought, I won't even use the taser, I'll kill him with my bare hands. I really wanted to do that. It seemed that would be a good ending. I would feel good about that.

SERGEANT BRYLES

We were *so* desperate for warm bodies. Once I was at a recruiting table up at the college and this kid went by and he picked up a flyer out of politeness, and I said, 'What's your major?' and he said, 'Comparative Religions.' And I literally said, 'Well, have you ever thought about applying that knowledge as a patrol officer for New London County?'

SHERIFF SOLOMON

Anyone could get into the Old Wooden City; there was no real security. The 'security' was the sign that mentioned history. There's no better way to keep teenagers out of a place than the threat of learning something.

It was a re-creation of the original town settlement. Eight bucks to get in, but at night with no one around, you could squeeze through the posts out front without much trouble if you really wanted.

Porter had never been there before. It was like a weird movie set, all these wooden cabins and farmhouses with thatched roofs, and a mill, and a little path winding all through it. By the time I got there, of course it was flooded with lights from outside, but for Porter, going into any of those buildings would have been like going into a total blackout.

CINDY, TOUR GUIDE

When you think about it, to sign one of those terrible seven-year indentured contracts and leave home forever and get on a ship for months with all that disease, a lot of those people who came over had to be serious lowlifes. But to get donations, we just went with whatever the dumb tourists wanted to believe—'Oh, the people who built our town were such *brave heroes!*'—and we just lied, we'd be like, 'Oh yeah, it was absolutely *never* just somebody's violent cousin with a ton of gambling debt, no way...'

BARB SOLOMON

In time, he entered a re-creation of the convalescence hospital where settlers first stayed upon getting off a ship from London or Toulon. It was often necessary to lie two to a bed for days or weeks recovering from the terrible ocean voyage. Volunteers from the historical society had spent weeks building the mahogany beds to historical specifications, then lined them up along both walls. A large iron crucifix was mounted to a high wall.

He stood in the doorway, listening. He felt for light switches, but there were none. Slowly and silently, he reached for the flashlight on his duty belt... but like his window punch and gloves, it was back in his cruiser.

Interrogation room audio:

CY

I couldn't believe he couldn't see me. I was standing right in the aisle there between all those beds. I was willing him to walk forward. My intention was to stand there in the dark and not move a muscle. And sure enough, he finally started to walk toward me, but real slow, like he had no idea I was there. I had merged with the darkness completely.

SHERIFF SOLOMON

He would take a step and stop... take a step, then stop. All his senses would have been heightened, but God, inside that building, with the trees all around the place blocking the sky, you talk about *dark...*

Interrogation room audio:

CY

He was right in front of me, like the distance you are from me now. He was right in front of me and I was invisible. And I felt this rush of power like nothing I can really describe. I was a great crystal eagle, I was bursting with wonder. And I lunged. I thought, *I can pull his head off. I can do it with my hands. That's what I want, it can be done, he's been brought right to me to do this. They'll ask, 'How did he do what he did?' and I'll say 'With these hands.'*

SHERIFF SOLOMON

I've been in there since, and stood where he stood with the lights out to see what it was like.

SHERIFF SOLOMON AND BARB SOLOMON:

It's a shadowland.

We hear the sounds of Claysmith late at night once again... but this time, a police siren cuts through the quiet.

DETECTIVE MENKIE (*giving a presentation in a large room*)

Officer Wisconsky's shot was off, but he got Dunker pretty much right in the fat part of the inner elbow at close range. That's a completely debilitating wound. It's my understanding that when the medics got there, the man's forearm wasn't hanging on by much. That's game, set, and match right there. There are no Jasons or Hannibal Lecters that are gonna bounce back from that. Welcome to the real world, motherfu----.

The police officers in attendance laugh heartily.

Interrogation room audio:

CY

I started to laugh looking down at it because there wasn't any pain whatsoever, no pain. I was able to sort of admire this amazing body I inhabited. I just laid there looking up at the ceiling and laughing. I knew I'd heal faster than anyone would realize. I should be half-dead but I'm alive and

I'm already giving you this statement. I'm not on any pain medication. That should really tell you something about who I am.

DETECTIVE MENKIE

Didn't get to take the officer's head off though, did you? And we *got* you, too, looks like. I'm looking at a man who's missing half an arm and isn't going anywhere ever again.

CY

Sometimes there's a grander design.

PRE-RECORDED VOICE

Thank you for accessing the E-Archiva Law Enforcement Media Database. E-Archiva is hiring superstars! Go to www.earchiva.com/careers to take the next step towards your future!

BARB SOLOMON

Outside the hulking ruins of the bread factory, my dying friend Jackie read out the corny resurrection ritual we'd found in some young adult novel banned by our school. We waited in the dark and the cold, in reverent silence, for the spirit of the ashes to rise. Our eyes were wide and our hearts were completely open.

But of course, the spirit did not rise. We had been lied to. Still, we laughed and congratulated ourselves for our courage, and for getting so close to that skull-like place full of black sockets and jagged pits, and ash that still sometimes swirled in the wind months after the fire.

And yes, we did finally get caught. Somehow getting caught made it one of the most profound memories of my childhood. Feeling the sweltering force of how much my father cared about me, even in his anger.

WOMAN ON THE STREET

So of course what happened in that climate at the time was that the public was out for blood—you know, *Facebook* wasn't gonna let anyone see this situation clearly, and the D.A. who was trying to get re-elected or reappointed or whatever got swept up in that, and he went all out to depict this guy as a cold-blooded killer instead of somebody completely screwed by the drug pirates destroying his brain chemistry. And the whole thing became a circus and the next thing you know, they find him guilty, and they give him like twelve thousand years in jail instead of sending him to a mental hospital. And there was a podcast about it, and then Netflix did a thing, blah blah blah, so it got old in a hurry. That was how I found out Netflix stopped renting DVDs actually, so *they* can burn in hell too.

MAN ON THE STREET

Seems like I read an article... or maybe it was on YouTube or something... where during the trial—I *think* it was that trial—one of the scientists who worked for Port Biopharma completely snapped because of all the bad decisions he was forced to make over the years, and he barged into the CEO's office and he put a gun to the CEO's head and he pulled the trigger... and nothing happened, and it was because someone at the gun maker had bought all these thousands of faulty firing pins from Russia to get a kickback because he knew he was leaving the job anyway, something like that. Just a complete corruption festival.

It's not like there's angels everywhere you turn, you know? I swear, sometimes I think I'm gonna be that guy that moves to some backwater town where there's like a total of twelve people so I don't have to deal with anyone ever again. Some real small town where everyone's just got their heads down and they go to work and then they chill the hell out.

I just don't know what I'd do on weekends.

BARB SOLOMON

Growing up, he would always remind me that no matter how mad the world might seem, there would always be people who didn't hesitate to stand up, be the ones who stood for reason, and logic, and calm. Be the builders. In every time of history, he once said, across all the eras, there would always be a certain percentage, in all the quiet houses around us, of the strong. Just basic math. And because of this, the world was never quite completely lost.

I saw him as one of those people, and he has never wavered. Now I wake up each day and try to be what he is, in my own small way. I drive to my lab every morning at seven, and I study the science of things breaking down, and when I can, I try to stitch them back together, quietly and dutifully.

Some of it is misplaced nostalgia, maybe. A dream of restoring order to the chaos that broke my friend Jackie's small body. Or even bringing the town I grew up in back to life as well. But every time I go back there to visit and walk those fields, it seems more and more like that just can't happen.

It doesn't get me down, though. There's a motto written in grease marker on the glass wall of my office. We repeat it often here. We laugh about it in meetings. The words read: 'It's okay. Entropy is nobody's fault.'

Courtroom audio:

JUDGE CLOWDER

Okay, Mr. Dunker, I'm going to go ahead and let you speak at this point. I probably shouldn't, but I think it might be a *very* long time before you get another chance. This will be strictly for the court record, you understand? It's not going to change anything. We're not going to be making any alterations to your situation today.

I'm satisfied by the many medical opinions submitted that the A54 originally introduced into your system has not been a factor in your actions for years, and hasn't been since 2023, and is not to blame for the murder of your cellmate, Mr. Dorn. I don't understand your persistent evil any more than anyone else does. Frankly, I don't know if I want to hear what you have to say. But if you want to speak, I'll allow it.

CY

I don't know what else to add, your honor. I believe I am the devil, and I will prove it again.

JUDGE CLOWDER

Maybe you are, buddy.

CY
Yes.

JUDGE CLOWDER (*sighing*)
Okay, we're adjourned. Everyone have a happy Thanksgiving.

CY
Thank you, your honor.