



KNIFEPOINT HORROR: BOOK ONE

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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 E-MAIL 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. IT IS A SMALL SUBURB FIFTEEN MILES NORTH OF RICHMOND MADE UP OF A FEW MIDDLE-CLASS HOUSING COMMUNITIES AND SMALL BUSINESSES. IT HAS A POPULATION OF ABOUT ELEVEN THOUSAND. 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 E-MAIL 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 WHEN HE ANSWERED THE PHONE WITH A CURT 'YES?' 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 NINTH 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 WHICH 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, ALL OF THEM MOSTLY INACCESSIBLE EXCEPT THROUGH AN ACCOUNT PASSWORD. 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 NINTH, 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 DIGITAL 8 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 CONVINCHE HIS WIFE TO MOVE THERE SO THEY COULD RAISE THEIR CHILDREN IN A PLEASANT SUBURB. • THE NINTH 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

TEN A.M. • I MET MY EMPLOYER FOR THE DAY, CORDING, AT THE ROBIN SONG COMMUTER TRAIN STATION. I DIDN'T KNOW WHERE HE HAD COME FROM. 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. I EXPECTED A EUROPEAN ACCENT BUT HE SOUNDED COMPLETELY MIDWESTERN. 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. IT WAS ONLY A FEW SENTENCES LONG. HE TOOK THE ONLY COPY. AFTER ASKING 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. HE ASKED ME IF MY TENNIS SHOES WERE GOOD ONES AND I SAID YES. 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. WE WOULD PROBABLY BE DONE BY FOUR O'CLOCK OR SO. HE HAD NEVER TAPED IN ROBIN SONG BEFORE. 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. OCCASIONALLY WE WOULD PASS SOMEONE WHO WOULD GIVE US A FUNNY LOOK. THEY MUST HAVE THOUGHT I WAS MAKING A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT THIS MAN. 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 FOOT PATH THAT RUNS FOR EIGHT MILES TOWARD RICHMOND, CORDING LEFT IT AND WALKED OVER INTO A SMALL THATCH OF TREES WHICH SEEMED TO HAVE NO PARTICULAR MEANING. AT FIRST I THOUGHT HE MEANT TO RELIEVE HIMSELF. 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 WHICH 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. IT WAS UNEXPLAINABLE. 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, LAZILY SHOOTING VIDEO. 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 WHICH 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 HE 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. AND I KNEW ALSO THAT OVER THE FOLLOWING YEARS, A LEGEND HAD GROWN ABOUT THE HOUSE. IT WAS SAID THAT NO MATTER HOW DECREPIT ITS EXTERIOR BECAME, THE INSIDE WAS STILL PERFECTLY CLEAN AND FLAWLESS, BECAUSE NO VANDALS WOULD

EVER DARE ENTER IT. NO ONE HAD EVER BOUGHT THE HOUSE. IT HAD NEVER BEEN TORN DOWN. WHEN THE MOVIE PRODUCER I HAD WORKED FOR THAT SINGLE DAY HAD BEEN LOOKING FOR A HAUNTED HOUSE TYPE OF LOCATION FOR SOME EXTERIOR SHOTS, I HAD RECOMMENDED THE SETTLE HOUSE. TRENT KNEW ABOUT IT TOO, BUT IT WASN'T BIG ENOUGH FOR HIS PURPOSES. HE HIMSELF HAD NEVER GONE NEAR IT. HIS UNCLE HAD ACTUALLY ONCE BRIEFLY EMPLOYED IRWIN SETTLE AT HIS KITE SHOP. • 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 WHICH 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. IT TOOK QUITE SOME TIME TO REACH OUR DESTINATION. 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 THINK WHAT

BEGAN TO MAKE THE FEAR SINK IN AND STAY THERE WAS THAT CORDING DID NOT SEEM AT ALL INSANE OR EVEN REMOTELY DISTURBED. IT WAS BECOMING OBVIOUS THAT HE KNEW AND FELT THINGS THAT HAD CHANGED HIM SOMEHOW. 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 12:15, 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. NOTHING HAD BEEN ADDED. THE RED DOORS ON THE FRONT OF THE SCHOOL WERE NOW PAINTED BLUE, BUT OTHERWISE I MAY HAVE WELL STEPPED BACK INTO 1988. 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. HE HAD DASHED OUT OF HIS HOUSE THROUGH A NEW ROUND OF FLURRIES AGAINST HIS PARENTS' COMMANDS. HE RAN IN HIS SLIPPERS TO THE PLANE. THE SUN HAD JUST BARELY RISEN OVER THE TREES. 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 GOT 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 WHICH 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. WHETHER HIS EYES WERE OPEN OR CLOSED, I COULDN'T TELL. • 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 ASKED HIM IF HE INTENDED TO TAKE CARE OF THE SITUATION OR IF HE HIMSELF HAD TO DO IT. AT FIRST THERE WAS NO ANSWER AT ALL. CORDING WAS ABOUT TO REPEAT THE QUESTION BUT FINALLY COAKLIN SAID, 'YOU DO IT.' 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 RE-CHARGE MY CAMERA BATTERY, AND WALKED DOWN THE ROAD THREE QUARTERS OF A MILE INTO CHELTENBROOK, 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 WHICH HE'D FELT FOOLISH ABOUT LATER. HE WAS 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 WHICH 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 NON-STOP. 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 SUDDENLY FELT SO INCREDIBLY TIRED TALKING TO STEVE THAT I TOLD HIM I NEEDED TO LIE DOWN. WITHIN TWO MINUTES, I HAD FALLEN ASLEEP. WHEN I WOKE UP, I APOLOGIZED PROFUSELY. I IMMEDIATELY ASSUMED I HAD BEEN OUT FOR HOURS. BUT IT HAD ONLY BEEN A FEW MINUTES. I WAS COMPLETELY DISORIENTED. 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 KNEW 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 WHICH 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. CORDING KEPT RUBBING HIS FOREHEAD, A HEADACHE MAKING HIM SICK. HE SEEMED FRUSTRATED BY OUR LACK OF PROGRESS. 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 UNDERGROUND 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. I FELT LESS SCARED SOMEHOW WHEN I WATCHED HIM ONLY THROUGH THE VIEWFINDER, WHICH MADE HIM SMALL. 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. AND I DIDN'T LIKE WHERE WE WERE GOING. THE SIGHTS WERE BECOMING EVEN MORE FAMILIAR. THE PATH WE TOOK MIMICKED TOO MANY OF THE ONES I TOOK IN MY YOUTH TO NAVIGATE THE TOWN, WHICH SEEMED SO BIG TO ME BACK THEN. 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 WHICH 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. BUT I KEPT UP, UNABLE TO NOT

LOOK, TO NOT FIND OUT WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT. I WAS SURE CORDING KNEW EXACTLY WHAT I WAS FEELING AND KNEW THAT I WOULDN'T STOP. CORDING FINALLY BEGAN TO WALK MORE SLOWLY. 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 WHO 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. WHEN WE ENCOUNTERED A FIFTY-FOOT STRETCH WHERE WE COULD PROBABLY HAVE BEEN SEEN THROUGH ONE OF THE HOUSE'S FRONT WINDOWS, WE QUICKENED OUR PACE LIKE BURGLARS. THEN WE WENT BACK DOWN THE LONG DIRT PATH TOWARD BRIAN LANE. EVEN BEFORE WE GOT TO IT, CORDING HAD TO STOP, BEND ON ONE KNEE, AND REST, BREATHING HEAVILY. ALL HIS ENERGY WAS GONE. I MYSELF FELT LIKE I WAS DEVELOPING A FEVER. 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.' • AFTER THAT, CORDING WALKED THROUGH ROBIN SONG WITH LESS DETERMINATION, HAVING TO SIT SEVERAL TIMES ON BENCHES AND SIDEWALKS TO REST AND CATCH HIS BREATH. I KEPT UP MY END OF THE BARGAIN BY CONTINUING TO VIDEOTAPE HIM, THOUGH MY MIND WAS IN A FOG. I GOT THE SENSE THAT HE KEPT GOING ON FOOT JUST TO DISTRACT ME FROM THE FACT THAT HE REALLY ONLY HAD ONE DESTINATION IN MIND NOW. IT WAS MY GRANDFATHER'S HOUSE, UNDER COVER OF NIGHT. • 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 WHICH 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 WHICH 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 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. ALMOST TOO PERFECTLY, NO ONE HAD SEEN WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO US. THE PARKING LOT WAS QUIET AND

UNPOPULATED, EVEN THOUGH THERE WERE ALMOST A DOZEN BUSINESSES WITHIN FIFTY YARDS OF US. THE PEOPLE WHO ENTERED THEM AND EXITED THEM DID SO FROM THE FRONT SIDEWALK ON ROSANDA ROAD AND COULDN'T SEE US. FINALLY I STOOD UP. 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. I WATCHED HIS FACE FOR ANY SIGN OF REAL SHOCK, VISIBLE EVIDENCE THAT HE FELT HE WAS DEALING WITH SOMETHING HERE THAT HE COULD NOT FATHOM. BUT HE REMAINED A CYPHER.

- FOR A TIME, CORDING AND I DID NOTHING BUT SIT ON ROSANDA AND WATCH THE ANNUAL AUTUMN FESTIVAL WHICH 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. TWO DIFFERENT BANDS PLAYED. 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. THE POSSIBILITY OF MOLESTATION WAS VERY REAL AS WELL. ASIDE FROM THAT, THEIR TIME IN ROBIN SONG WAS GOING ALONG WELL. WE PARTED AND I NEVER SAW TRENT AGAIN. I HAD 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 WE TOOK FRIGHTENED ME BADLY. 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 INHABITANCE, NO LITTER, NO FOOTPRINTS OTHER THAN OURS. I THOUGHT OF STOPPING, BUT I WAS TOO PARALYZED WITH FRIGHT TO DO ANYTHING DIFFERENT FROM WHAT CORDING DID. IT FELT SO MUCH SAFER TO PUT ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER, OVER AND OVER AND OVER AGAIN, THAN TO SPEAK OR MAKE ANY COMPLAINT OR SUGGEST ANY OTHER COURSE OF ACTION. 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. CORDING SLOWED HIS STEP AND SO DID I. WE APPROACHED IT BUT STOPPED FAR FROM IT. 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 DRAIN PIPE 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 WHICH 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 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 WINDOW PANE 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. WHILE CORDING STOOD OFF TO THE SIDE, EYEING THE TRAIL AND HAVING LOST HIS FASCINATION WITH THE HOUSE, OR MAYBE JUST TRYING TO CONCEAL IT, 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. MY HEART LEAPT INTO MY THROAT WHEN I NOTICED THIS, BUT THEN I HEARD CORDING SAY SIMPLY, 'LOOK.' 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, 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. MAYBE THEY HAD ALL MIRACULOUSLY REMAINED SILENT. MAYBE THAT DECISION HAD SOMEHOW BEEN MADE FOR THEM. OR MAYBE I WAS THE ONLY UNFORTUNATE PERSON OUTSIDE CORDING'S OBSCURE REALM OF ACADEMIA WHOM HE HAD EVER EXPOSED TO THE TRUTH. 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. FOR THE FIRST AND ONLY TIME, CORDING SPOKE TO A REGULAR CITIZEN OF ROBIN SONG. HE PAUSED TO TELL THE GIRL IT WASN'T SAFE TO BE OUTSIDE ALONE THIS LATE, BUT SHE ASSURED HIM THAT SHE LIVED IN THE HOUSE RIGHT IN FRONT OF US AND HER PARENTS HAD SAID IT WAS OKAY. CORDING'S MANNER WITH HER WAS SO GENTLE THAT I COULD ALMOST SEE THE TRUE HUMAN BEING INSIDE HIM INSTEAD OF THE AUTOMATON HE HAD BECOME. 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. IF EITHER ONE OF US HAD BEEN EVEN SLIGHTLY BIGGER, IT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE. WHEN MY FEET TOUCHED THE CEMENT FLOOR AND I LET MYSELF DROP FULLY IN, I FELT CRIMINAL AND UNCLEAR. 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 BEDSHEET 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 IN THE WINDOW, 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. WHATEVER IT TRULY WAS, NO MAN OR WOMAN SHOULD EVER GO BACK TO DISCOVER. ROBIN SONG, VIRGINIA IS A FOUL, HAUNTED PLACE, A SISTER CITY TO OTHER CORRUPTED LOCATIONS WHICH FORSCH CORDING DESCRIBED TO ME. I COUNT MYSELF INCREDIBLY LUCKY TO BE AWAY FROM IT FOREVER. I WILL NEVER RETURN. 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. 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.

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 WHICH 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 WHICH 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 CELL PHONES 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 SPIDERWEBS 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 NINE O'CLOCK 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 SPIDERWEBS 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 TO. 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 RECALLED EVERY DETAIL OF THE TRIP WHICH THEN BEGAN: THE SNOW ON THE GROUND, THE MOON HIDDEN BY THE CLOUDS ABOVE THEM, 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 WHICH 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. I WAS AS CLOSE TO THE COACHMAN AT THAT MOMENT AS I HAD EVER BEEN. I DETECTED A SCENT LIKE ROTTING APPLES. 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.

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 HIMSELF 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. GRANTHAM 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, LOOKING AT ME QUIZZICALLY. 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 HARSH TONES. 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 SHOWED UP AT MRS. CROWDY'S HOUSE AT ELEVEN P.M. ON OCTOBER 21, 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 WHICH 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 WHICH 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 WHICH COMMITTED THE MURDER. MRS. CROWDY CLAIMED THAT SHIRLEY FROST WAS KILLED BY A DEMON. THIS DEMON'S NAME WAS *TAZKU-NIL*. 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 WHICH 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 GREY, 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 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.

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 WHICH 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 LAID 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 OTHERS. 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 FREDERICTS 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 FURTHER 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 CONVINC 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 NANOTECHNOLOGIST 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, RE-TESTED, 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 WHICH 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 ONE 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 WHICH I'VE NEVER SEEN MENTION OF IN ANY NEWSPAPER, ON ANY WEB SITE. THE HARVESTER WORMS WHICH 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 WHICH 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.

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 WHICH 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 FOURTEENTH, 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 JIMMIED 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 WHICH 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 SMALL 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 EIGHTEENTH 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 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 CLASSROOM WHERE JEAN WILLETT WAS TEACHING MYSELF AND TWO OTHER STUDENTS HOW TO TELL TIME. I HAVE ALWAYS CLAIMED THAT THOSE MEMORIES ARE SIMPLY GONE FOREVER. EVERYTHING TODAY IS DIFFERENT. THE CATATONIA WHICH 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 LIVED THROUGH THAT DAY, 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 BRANCHCHILD 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 FOURTH. 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, SWINGSETS, AND THE LIKE. JUST BEYOND THAT A LARGE FIELD BEGINS, ONE WHICH 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 WHICH 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 WHICH 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 WHICH SHE CLAIMED WAS DUE TO THE SLIPPAGE OF A HAMMER. THE BATTERY CHARGES DIDN'T COINCIDE CHRONOLOGICALLY WITH THE HOSPITALIZATIONS, BUT JAMES 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 WAS 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* ONE NIGHT 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 OTHER SURVIVORS OF TIMOTHY SHAUGH'S ATTACK ON ROOM 15. 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 MOST OF US DECLINED. WE THREE SURVIVORS, 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 WHICH THE AUTHOR COULD PROBABLY NEVER HAVE KNOWN ABOUT. FOR INSTANCE, HE COULDN'T HAVE BEEN 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. IT WAS ONLY ME GOING INTO SEACRIST ON THAT FIRST DAY. 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 SHE 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 TRASHCAN 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 ONADELPHIA 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. • I'VE SAID THAT THERE WERE TWO OTHER SURVIVORS OF THE TIMOTHY SHAUGH INCIDENT. THEY'RE BOTH MALES THE SAME AGE AS I. THEIR NAMES ARE PHILIP DARBY AND LOUIS LAIRD. I'VE DISCOVERED THROUGH SECONDHAND ASSOCIATIONS THAT PHILIP DARBY IS IN LAW SCHOOL IN CALIFORNIA, AND THAT HE HAS AMBITIONS TO WORK FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT WHEN HE GRADUATES. LOUIS LAIRD LIVES JUST ONE MILE FROM SEACRIST SCHOOL. SINCE HE WAS FIVE YEARS OLD, HE HAS NEVER ATTENDED SCHOOL MORE THAN FOUR MILES FROM THE ROOM WHERE THE ATTACK TOOK PLACE. HE OPERATES A SMALL PRINT SHOP OWNED BY HIS PARENTS ON BEECHNUT STREET, JUST TWO BLOCKS FROM THE SCHOOL. NEITHER OF THESE YOUNG MEN HAS EVER TOLD ROURKE BILLINGS OR ANY OTHER AUTHOR OR INTERVIEWER ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED IN ROOM 15. PHILIP DARBY HAS NOT SPOKEN FOR SO MANY YEARS OUT OF CONTEMPT FOR THE MEDIA AND FOR THE SAKE OF PRIVACY. LOUIS LAIRD, ACCORDING TO HIS PARENTS WHEN I TALKED TO THEM, HASN'T BEEN AS FORTHRIGHT WITH HIS

OWN REASONS, BUT THEY SEEM OBVIOUS TO ME NOW. HE'S FRIGHTENED TO THINK OF THAT DAY BECAUSE LIKE ME, HE'S STILL HAUNTED BY IT. LOUIS'S DOCTOR IS APPARENTLY NOT A BIG BELIEVER IN DREDGING UP THE PAST FOR THE SAKE OF THE FUTURE. LOUIS'S PARENTS TELL ME THAT IN THE COURSE OF HIS THERAPY, SEACRIST ISN'T MENTIONED, EVER. THE DOCTOR CHOOSES TO EMPHASIZE THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF LOUIS'S LIFE AND TO BUILD A KIND OF FENCE AROUND THE INCIDENTS. I WONDER IF THIS MIGHT WORK FOR ME, BUT I KNOW I CAN NEVER TAKE IT THAT FAR. THE THOUGHT OF SEACRIST DISAPPEARING FROM MY CONSCIOUS MIND IS UNTHINKABLE TO ME. I RESEARCHED THESE PEOPLE BECAUSE I WANTED TO KNOW IF IT WAS POSSIBLE THAT THE SECRET OF WHAT HAPPENED THAT DAY COULD REALLY DIE WITH ME. APPARENTLY THE ANSWER IS YES. PHILIP DARBY IS SIMPLY NOT INTERESTED IN THIS CIRCUS OF HORRORS. LOUIS LAIRD DOESN'T WANT HIS LIFE DESTROYED. IT GIVES ME ALL THE MORE REASON TO THINK. • 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 BUZZINGS 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 12 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. 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 SWEEPED 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 WHICH ENTERED THE SEACRIST LEGEND THREE WEEKS IMMEDIATELY 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 WHICH 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 BARBITUATE 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 WHICH 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. • 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 WHICH 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 ONE 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, UNABLE TO FEND FOR HIMSELF, AND 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, WAS 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 NINETEENTH, HE SLIPPED OUT OF THE REC ROOM AT ABOUT EIGHT 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 WHICH WOULD HAVE BEEN REMOVED OR SIMPLY BROKEN BY 1980 AT THE LATEST. BUT THERE THEY WERE. LOCKS WHICH 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 SALT WATER. 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*. EVERY YEAR THAT PASSES BURIES THEM DEEPER, JUST AS THE REASONS FOR SEACRIST'S ABANDONMENT ARE BURIED. THE OFFICIAL CLOSURE OF THE PLACE NEVER ACTUALLY CAME. IT SIMPLY NEVER RE-OPENED. THIS INVOLVED LETTING AN ENTIRE SCHOOL GO TO ROT AND REQUIRED THE BUSSING OF EVERY CHILD TO THREE DIFFERENT SCHOOLS AROUND THE COUNTY FOR YEARS, WHICH IN TURN TOUCHED OFF A MASSIVE BUDGET

CONTROVERSY, WHICH CAUSED ENDLESS FINANCIAL HEADACHES TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE SCHOOL BOARD. SO I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT THERE WAS NO SECRET AGREEMENT THAT SEACRIST REALLY WAS A HAUNTED STONE ROLLING DOWNHILL WHICH COULDN'T BE STOPPED AND SO HAD TO BE SEALED FOREVER. I IMAGINE THE ADULTS SLEEPING IN THEIR BEDS AT NIGHT AND THINKING OF THE ESCALATION OF EVENTS WHICH ENDED IN THE SLAUGHTER OF A TEACHER, AND WONDERING WHERE IT MIGHT GO FROM THERE IF SEACRIST WAS ALLOWED TO STAY OPEN. WHAT COULD JANUARY HAVE BROUGHT? WHAT WAS WORSE THAN MURDER? THAT'S THE REAL REASON WHY THE PLACE NEVER TAUGHT ANOTHER CHILD TO READ AND WRITE. MANY RESPONSIBLE ADULTS THREW AROUND STATISTICS AND HAGGLED OVER ZONING SPECIFICS FOR YEARS AFTERWARD, BUT IT WAS ALL WHITEWASH. WHAT HAPPENED WAS THAT SOMEONE SOMEWHERE GAVE IN TO HIS OR HER DARKEST FEARS ABOUT THIS UNIVERSE AND CONVINCED THE RIGHT PEOPLE TO DO THE SAME THING. AFTER 1977 SOME GROUP OR THE OTHER WAS ALWAYS CONVENIENTLY AROUND TO STOP SEACRIST FROM BEING RE-OPENED, ON GROUNDS RANGING FROM MONEY PROBLEMS TO ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS. EVEN AT THE AGE OF NINE I KNEW IT WAS OVER. • 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. SO THEY ASKED US IF WE FELT SAFE IN OUR MOMMY'S AND DADDY'S HOUSE, IF WE FELT AFRAID OF ANYONE, AND IF WE THOUGHT ANYONE HAD BEEN UNFAIR. THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS WERE WRITTEN DOWN IN A FILE AND PUT SOMEWHERE. *THE UNTOLD STORY* CLAIMS THAT ABOUT FIVE PERCENT OF THE STUDENT BODY WAS REFERRED FOR FURTHER TREATMENT AND PRIVATE COUNSELING. ONE OF THOSE CHILDREN WAS LAURIE BURKE, SHE WHO MADE THE INSANE CLAIM OF SURREAL CONTACT WITH STEVEN ODOM. 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 WAS KEPT OUT OF SCHOOL ENTIRELY FOR ANOTHER YEAR, STUDYING ON MY OWN. AND I BEGAN TO BE NORMAL AGAIN. MY EARLIEST THERAPY IS A DIM MEMORY. THE THING I REMEMBER MOST VIVIDLY IS SITTING BESIDE MY FATHER'S HOSPITAL DEATHBED WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER. I VISITED HIM EVERY DAY FOR A MONTH, AND WE TALKED ABOUT A LOT OF THINGS, BUT SEACRIST WAS NEVER AMONG THEM. FINALLY, NEAR THE END, I ASKED HIM WHY I COULDN'T HAVE JUST BEEN TOLD EVERYTHING, WHY THERE HAD BEEN SO MUCH HIDDEN, WHY STEVEN ODOM WAS PASSED OFF AS A SAINT, WHY THE PHOTOGRAPHS HAD BEEN KEPT AWAY FROM ME. I WANTED TO KNOW THE POINT OF THE PRETENDING THAT THERE WAS SOME CLOSET THE ADULTS COULD PUT THOSE THINGS INTO WHERE THEY'D NEVER BE FOUND, BECAUSE THEY INEVITABLY WOULD BE. HE TOLD ME ONLY THAT I NEEDED TO BE PROTECTED. HE SAID THAT NATURALLY, I WOULD FIND OUT THAT THE WORLD WAS A SINISTER PLACE OF THE UNEXPLAINED AND THE UNTHINKABLE. HE JUST HADN'T KNOWN WHAT IT WOULD DO TO ME TO EXPOSE IT THAT EARLY. BUT EVEN AFTER I HAD BEEN INSIDE MRS. WILLETT'S ROOM TO WATCH HER DIE, THE LIES HAD FLOWED. I CAME TO HATE THE PEOPLE WHO HAD TOLD THEM TO US, ALL OF THEM. MY FATHER DIED ON JUNE 1ST, 1986.

- 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 WHICH LASTED FOURTEEN DAYS AND FOURTEEN NIGHTS. THE COMA WAS ABSOLUTELY DREAMLESS. AND WHEN I AWOKE I REALIZED IT AGAIN. I AM SEACRIST. SO IS EVERY CHILD WHO WENT THROUGH THOSE DOORS AND CAME OUT WITH TEN DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF THE FACTS. • 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. I TOLD HIM NO, BUT I WAS FAMILIAR WITH THE FORMAT AS I HAD HEARD ABOUT IT. I ASKED HIM WHY HE WAS CALLING. HE SOUNDED VERY PROUD WHEN HE TOLD ME THAT HE HAD BYPASSED HIS ASSOCIATE PRODUCER AND DECIDED TO CALL ME HIMSELF. HE SAID HE REALIZED THAT THE SUBJECT WAS DELICATE AND THAT PEOPLE'S FEELINGS HAD TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT. WHAT SUBJECT? I ASKED HIM. 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. HE HAD DONE SOME INITIAL RESEARCH INTO THE SCHOOL'S HISTORY AND WAS INTERESTED IN INTERVIEWING MANY FORMER STUDENTS. I ASKED HIM IF I WAS THE FIRST TO BE CONTACTED. HE CHUCKLED AND SAID NO, NOT BY ANY MEANS. IN FACT, THE SHOW HAD ALREADY LINED UP EIGHT INTERVIEWS AND WAS GOING TO TAPE THEM LATER IN THE WEEK. I ASKED FOR THE NAMES OF THE PEOPLE HE WAS GOING TO INTERVIEW AND HE DISAPPEARED FOR A MINUTE TO FIND THE LIST. HE RETURNED TO THE PHONE AND READ IT OFF TO ME. I RECOGNIZED THE NAMES ONLY DIMLY. I DON'T THINK I HAD EVER SPOKEN TO ANY OF THEM. 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 THREE SURVIVORS OF TIMOTHY SHAUGH'S CRIME EIGHTEEN YEARS BEFORE. I ASKED IF HE HAD CALLED THE OTHER SURVIVORS. 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. I

ASKED WHAT THE FOCUS OF THE PROGRAM WOULD BE, AND WHAT SORT OF ATTITUDE IT WOULD TAKE. QUESTED CLAIMED HE WASN'T CERTAIN, BUT IT WOULD MOSTLY BE A SIMPLE RECAPPING OF THE UNEXPLAINED EVENTS WHICH WERE SO FAMOUS. WHEN HE TOLD ME THIS, I COULD ALREADY ENVISION THE PROGRAM, THE QUICK CUTS OF BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS, THE OMINOUS MUSIC PLAYING IN THE FOREGROUND. I TOLD HIM THAT THE FACTS SPOKE FOR THEMSELVES AND THAT THERE WAS REALLY NO NEED FOR ME. 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 SURVIVOR. I HAD ACTUALLY SEEN WHAT TOOK PLACE INSIDE ROOM 15. IF I WANTED, I WOULD BE INTERVIEWED IN MY HOME, TELLING WHAT IT WAS LIKE, AND I WOULD BE EXPECTED TO GIVE DETAILS OF WHAT TRANSPIRED. QUESTED CLAIMED OFF THE RECORD THAT THE PAY SCALE OF MY APPEARANCE WOULD MOST LIKELY BE ALTERED SOMEWHAT BY MY RECALL. EVERY INTERVIEWEE WOULD BE PAID THE SUM OF THREE HUNDRED AND TWENTY DOLLARS FOR THEIR APPEARANCE ON THE SHOW, BUT A GUEST SUCH AS MYSELF, WHO COULD OFFER A GREAT DEAL OF FASCINATING INFORMATION, COULD BE PAID SOMETHING MORE. FROM THIS I TOOK THE IMPRESSION THAT FOR EVERY DETAIL I GAVE ABOUT THE DAY I WATCHED TIMOTHY SHAUGH KILL MY TEACHER WITH AN AXE, THE REIMBURSEMENT FOR MY TIME WOULD BE INCREASED. QUESTED TOOK OFFENSE THAT I SHOULD THINK THIS. HE SAID HE ONLY MEANT THAT IT WAS A VALUABLE STORY TO THE SHOW AND THEY WOULD BE APPRECIATIVE OF ANY INFORMATION I MIGHT BE ABLE TO GIVE, AND THAT WAS ALL. 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. QUESTED WONDERED IF IT WAS POSSIBLE THAT THE SHOW'S STAFF COULD FILL

IN THOSE DETAILS FOR ME, AND THEN MAYBE I COULD JUST CORROBORATE THAT THEY WERE TRUE. HE WASN'T QUITE SURE HOW THIS WOULD WORK, BUT THE SHAUGH CRIMES WERE IMPORTANT TO THE STORY, AND EYEWITNESS DETAILS WERE ESSENTIAL. I APOLOGIZED AND WISHED HIM GOOD LUCK ON THE STORY, AND I TOLD HIM I DIDN'T WANT TO BE CONTACTED AGAIN. 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 KNEW LOUIS. I KNEW HIS MIND BECAUSE HIS MIND WAS MINE. WE WERE ALL THREE BROTHERS, MYSELF AND LOUIS AND PHILIP DARBY. BUT LOUIS HAD BEEN ON THE EDGE OF SANITY FOR EIGHTEEN YEARS, JUST AS I HAD BEEN. THEN QUESTED TOLD ME HE ALREADY HAD SOMEONE IN SEACRIST TRYING TO FIND OUT EXACTLY WHERE LOUIS LIVED. I ASKED THIS COCKROACH IF HE WAS AWARE THAT THERE HAD BEEN FORTY SUICIDES SINCE SEACRIST CLOSED DOWN, WHICH MEANT THAT ALMOST TWELVE 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. THE RUMORS AND THE FACTS ARE GOING TO SWIRL TOGETHER IN MEMORY FOR ALL TIME, JUST AS THEY ALWAYS MUST WHEN WE'RE CONFRONTED WITH SOME EVENT OR SOME TRAGEDY BEYOND THE REALM OF ANYONE'S IMAGINATION. 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. YOU'VE WON. YOU WON WHEN I FELL TO THE FLOOR AND TIMOTHY SHAUGH WAS PUT BACK INTO MY DREAMS. WITH HIM CAME THE COLORS AND THE SOUNDS OF ROOM 15, EVERY VIVID SECOND WHICH I PRAYED EVERY NIGHT HAD BEEN LOST FOREVER. YOU DRAGGED IT OUT OF THAT CLOSET AND PUT IT ALL RIGHT INTO MY HANDS. YOU'LL GO MAD NOT KNOWING EVERYTHING, NOT HAVING YOUR HUNGER SATIED. IT'S UNTHINKABLE TO YOU, NOT KNOWING. SO I'M GOING TO TELL YOU ALL ONCE. I LEAVE THIS LETTER FOR ROURKE BILLINGS AND DON QUESTED AND FOR MY DOCTOR, FOR MY STEPFATHER WHO CALLED ME ABNORMAL AND TOLD ME WHEN I WAS NINETEEN TO JUST STRAIGHTEN OUT OR NEVER COME BACK TO MY MOTHER'S HOUSE, FOR THE MANY STUDENTS AT SEACRIST WHO SOMEHOW GOT WELL FAST AND NEVER LOOKED BACK, AND FOR ALL THEIR PARENTS WHO REFUSED TO TELL US ANYTHING BUT WHO WILL SIT AROUND *HAPPENINGS* LIKE DOGS, LAPPING UP EVERY BIT OF HORROR THAT THEY CAN GET THEIR MINDS ON. 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.

MY NAME IS ETHAN TYRELL. AT ABOUT NINE-THIRTY 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 CELL PHONE. WHEN I GOT INSIDE, I TURNED A LIGHT ON TO SEE IF ANYTHING HAD BEEN STOLEN. IT DIDN'T SEEM LIKE ANYTHING HAD BEEN. 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 HE 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 VIDEOTAPE 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 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 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. I WAS INCREDIBLY ANGRY THAT I HAD SPENT SO MANY YEARS TRYING TO GET MY LIFE BACK ON TRACK ONLY TO HAVE IT INTERRUPTED BY SOMETHING FROM THE PAST I WANTED TO FORGET SO BADLY. 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 REALIZED BACK THEN THAT THEY'D BOTCHED HIS RESURRECTION BADLY. DAVID WAS INCAPABLE OF UNDERSTANDING WHAT MADE ONE TRULY WORK. THE VIDEOTAPES 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. NEITHER ONE OF US SMELLED ANYTHING OUT OF THE ORDINARY, AND THERE WERE NO SIGNS OF A BREAK-IN. THE FIRST THING LINUS DID WAS TAKE A HANDGUN FROM HIS DESK DRAWER. THEN HE WENT INTO HIS BEDROOM AND PUT SOME THINGS IN A BAG AND SAID WE SHOULD GO RIGHT AWAY. 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 T.V. 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 FOR 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. I'VE TOLD MY CO-WORKERS THAT THERE'S A PROBLEM WITH THE LEASE. ONE OF THEM IS NICE ENOUGH TO PICK UP MY MAIL ONCE IN A WHILE. 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.

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, DC. 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 SECRETIVELY. 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) STRANGLER 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 WHICH 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 EMBALMMENT. 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 EYEHOLE 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 WHICH 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 WHICH 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 WHICH 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 WHICH 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 WHICH 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 THEN BUT BONES AND DUST. THESE WERE BURIED QUIETLY, AND THE SOCIETY 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 WHICH 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 FIST FIGHT. 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 WHICH 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.

MY NAME IS ELLIOT LEM. I'M WRITING THIS STORY DOWN IN A DIARY BECAUSE I WANT TO HAVE ONE RECORD OF IT, I WANT TO WRITE IT ONCE AND THEN I CAN BE DONE. I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT I'LL DO WITH THE DIARY, BUT IT WILL EXIST, AND THAT'S ALL I NEED. I'M THIRTY YEARS OLD RIGHT NOW. MOST OF WHAT HAPPENED TO ME HAPPENED WHEN I WAS TWENTY-FIVE, ONE YEAR OUT OF COLLEGE. I WENT TO 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 CAMPING UP IN THE SHENANDOAH MOUNTAINS FOR A WEEKEND. I TOOK JUST A TENT AND SOME BASIC GEAR AND GOT A PRIMITIVE SITE ABOUT A HALF MILE AWAY FROM THE CLOSEST CAMPGROUND, CLOSE ENOUGH THAT I COULD SEE THE FIRES PEOPLE MADE THERE. ON THE FIRST NIGHT OF CAMPING, I DECIDED TO GO FOR A WALK IN THE WOODS WITH JUST MY FLASHLIGHT. I WASN'T FAR AWAY FROM

THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL AND A POPULAR STREAM, SO I FIGURED THERE WOULD PROBABLY BE A FEW OTHER PEOPLE OUT WALKING. IT WAS ONLY NINE O'CLOCK OR SO. BUT I WAS PRETTY MUCH ALONE, WALKING DOWN A TRAIL THAT WOUND ALONG THE SIDE OF A PRETTY STEEP HILL. ON MY RIGHT, THE HILL SLOPED UPWARD, AND ON MY LEFT, IT SLOPED DOWNWARD TOWARD THE STREAM. MY INTENTION WAS TO FOLLOW THE HILL ALL THE WAY AROUND TO THE ROAD AND HIKE BACK UP FROM THERE. IT WOULD HAVE TAKEN ABOUT AN HOUR. AS I WAS WALKING, I HEARD FROM JUST UP AHEAD A SCUTTling IN THE LEAVES, LIKE SOMETHING HAD BEGUN TO MOVE SUDDENLY, AND THEN I HEARD A MAN SHRIEKING. HE APPEARED BEFORE ME COMING FROM AROUND A BEND IN THE TRAIL. HE WAS RUNNING AS FAST AS HE COULD RIGHT AT ME, AND HE WAS SCREAMING 'BEAR! BEAR!' IN A HIGH-PITCHED, TERRIFIED VOICE. HE NEVER EVEN SAW ME UNTIL HE COLLIDED WITH ME, TOTALLY OUT OF CONTROL. HE SLAMMED INTO THE RIGHT SIDE OF MY BODY, WHICH KNOCKED ME BACKWARDS SEVERAL FEET AND OFF THE TRAIL ENTIRELY. MY LEFT FOOT SKIDDED ON THE VERGE OF THE DOWNSLOPE AND I LOST MY BALANCE AND FELL. AS I WENT DOWN I SAW A SHAPE IN THE DARK, ON THE TRAIL, ABOUT THIRTY FEET AWAY, VERY LOW TO THE GROUND BUT MOVING VERY FAST, AND I SAW OUT OF THE CORNER OF MY EYE THAT THE MAN HAD MANAGED TO KEEP HIS FEET AFTER HITTING ME BUT HE JUMPED ONTO THE DOWNSLOPE TO GET AWAY, AND HE LOST HIS BALANCE TOO, UNABLE TO GET HIS FOOTING. WE BOTH ROLLED DOWN THE SLOPE, WHICH WAS DOTTED WITH THIN TREES. ABOUT HALFWAY DOWN, MY LEFT LEG CONNECTED HARD WITH ONE, AND I HEARD SOMETHING SNAP AND HALF OF IT WENT NUMB WHILE THE OTHER HALF JUST SEEMED TO EXPLODE. THE PAIN WAS AWFUL. I CAME TO REST ABOUT TEN FEET AWAY FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE SLOPE, SOME YARDS AWAY FROM THE STREAM'S BANK, AND I BLACKED OUT FOR JUST A SECOND BEFORE I CAME TO AGAIN. THE MAN WASN'T HURT FALLING DOWN THE SLOPE AND HE SCRAMBLED THROUGH THE LEAVES TOWARD ME. I WAS WHIMPERING, TRYING NOT TO SCREAM. THE MAN WAS PLEADING WITH ME NOT TO, HE SAID HE 'DIDN'T KNOW WHERE IT WENT,' AND THEN HE SAID, 'JESUS, IT WAS A MOUNTAIN LION, IT WAS

A MOUNTAIN LION.' HE ASKED ME WHAT WAS WRONG WITH ME. I TOLD HIM IT WAS MY LEG. HE TOOK A CELL PHONE OUT OF HIS JACKET AND HE PRESSED HIMSELF INTO THE GROUND, ALMOST FLAT ON HIS FACE, AND LOOKING UP THE SLOPE HE CALLED FOR HELP. HE CALLED THE PEOPLE HE HAD BEEN CAMPING WITH, AND TOLD THEM TO GET A RANGER. WHEN HE HUNG UP HE KEPT TELLING ME NOT TO SCREAM. HE WAS TERRIFIED THE MOUNTAIN LION, IF THAT'S WHAT IT TRULY HAD BEEN, WOULD COME FOR US. • 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 DRUGS MADE ME FEEL SO GOOD, IT'S THAT WITHOUT THEM, 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 DRUGS 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 STAYED INDOORS MOSTLY, DRINKING A LOT. THE JOB WAS REPULSIVE. IT WAS EXACTLY WHAT YOU'D EXPECT IT TO BE. 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. SO I SAW HORRIBLE THINGS. 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 E.P.A. 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. THE POLICE TOLD US IT WAS PROBABLY THE MOST PEACEFUL WAY TO DIE POSSIBLE. THE GUY HAD EVEN SAID SO IN HIS NOTE. 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. HE HAD BEEN RENTING THE HOUSE, SO IT HAD TO BE CLEANED. I ASSUMED SOME OF THE MONEY FOR IT WOULD COME OUT OF THE DEAD MAN'S SECURITY DEPOSIT. STRANGE THOUGHTS LIKE THESE OCCURRED TO ME WHEN IT ALL GOT SO DISTURBING. IF IT WAS A HOTEL OR A MOTEL, WE SOMETIMES HAD TO CUT OUT THE SPOT ON THE CARPET WHERE THE BLOOD HAD STAINED IT, OR SOMETIMES BRAIN MATTER. IT DIDN'T COME ALL THE WAY OUT A LOT OF

THE TIME. WE HAD A LOT OF CHEMICALS, BUT SOMETIMES THEY DIDN'T WORK.

- 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. THERE WAS ONLY ONE POLICE CAR THERE. 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, AND HE ASKED WHAT WE KNEW ABOUT THE INCIDENT, WHICH WAS NOTHING. PETER HAD JUST BEEN GIVEN AN ADDRESS AND AN IDEA OF WHAT MATERIALS WE'D NEED FOR THE CLEANUP. SO THE COP 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. NEITHER PETER NOR I HAD EVER HEARD OF SUCH BEHAVIOR FROM A NORMAL DOG. WE NEVER ASKED

WHAT THEY'D BEEN DOING TO IT, OR WHY IT HAD GONE SO INSANE. WE CLEANED THE PLACE UP, LIKE WE WERE TOLD TO. IT TOOK A COUPLE OF HOURS, THE HALLWAY AND THE SIDEWALK. SOMEONE PAID PETER, AND PETER PAID ME. • 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, NOT DOING ANY DAMAGE, BUT IT JUST IRRITATED THIS PERSON. • 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 HAD BEEN TRYING TO REACH PETER, BUT THERE WAS NO ANSWER, AND THEY NEEDED A ROOM CLEANED. THEY DIDN'T SAY WHY. AND I JUST SAID, 'WELL, I DON'T KNOW WHERE HE IS, AND I DON'T HAVE THE VAN, I'M JUST THE ASSISTANT,' AND THEY SAID ALL RIGHT, AND HUNG UP. THE NEXT NIGHT, THE SAME THING HAPPENED. THE POLICE CALLED PETER AND COULDN'T FIND HIM TO CLEAN A BEDROOM IN A HOUSE WHERE THERE'D BEEN A SUICIDE. SO 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 ONLY ROOM THERE I'D EVER REALLY BEEN IN. IN THERE, 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 RECALL SOMEONE OFFERING ME A LIFT AND ME SAYING NO. WHAT HAPPENED TO ME CAME IN LITTLE FLASHES. THAT'S THE ONLY WAY I CAN REMEMBER IT. 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 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 SAID SURE, I'LL BE THERE. I DIDN'T THINK I WOULD BE, THOUGH. AFTER BEING ARRESTED ALL I WANTED TO DO WAS GO BACK TO MY ROOM AND SLEEP, AND FIGURE OUT WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN TO ME. I HAD A COURT DATE JUST A WEEK FROM THEN. BUT 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, I THOUGHT THEY MIGHT SENSE IT SOMEHOW. 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. SO WE SAT AROUND, THERE WAS A MOVIE PLAYING ON THE TV, I THINK IT WAS 'COBRA VERDE'. 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 SAID TO ME, 'HEY, COME UPSTAIRS, I WANT TO SHOW YOU SOMETHING'. I REMEMBER THAT AS WE WENT UP THE STAIRS 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. SO HE OPENED UP A DRAWER IN THE BUREAU AND HE SAID 'LOOK AT THIS', AND HE HELD OUT A DAGGER, A REAL ONE, MADE OUT OF STEEL I THINK, BUT THE BLADE CURVED SHARPLY TO A STRANGE ANGLE. AND I SAID, 'THAT'S NICE, WHAT'S THAT FOR?' AND HE SAID 'NOTHING REALLY, THE SHAPE IS JUST INTERESTING. I USED TO MESS AROUND WITH THIS, IT'S 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 SAID, 'ARE YOU AT ALL INTERESTED IN THAT SORT OF THING?' LIKE HE WAS ASKING ME IF I WAS INTERESTED IN STAMP COLLECTING OR BASEBALL. I SAID NO, AND HE SAID HE REALLY WANTED TO EXPLAIN IT TO ME RATIONALLY SOMETIME SO I WOULDN'T THINK HE WAS CRAZY. I TRIED TO JUST SHRUG HIM OFF AND WE WENT BACK DOWNSTAIRS, AND I WOULD HAVE TRIED TO EXCUSE MYSELF AND LEAVE BUT I WAS TOO DRUNK, I GOT TOO DRUNK, JUST SITTING

AROUND WITH THESE PEOPLE. THEY WERE TAKING STRAIGHT GIN AND WHISKEY. AT SOME POINT MAURICE AND I WERE BACK UPSTAIRS AGAIN, HE SAID I SHOULDN'T DRIVE HOME AND I KNEW THAT HE WAS RIGHT, SO I WAS GOING TO SLEEP ON THE SOFA OR SOMETHING BUT WE WERE BACK IN HIS ROOM FOR SOME REASON. IT WAS DARK, AND I COULD ONLY SEE THE LIGHT OF HIS CIGARETTE AS HE SAT ON THE COT, AND HE WAS EXPLAINING SATANISM TO ME. HE WAS EXPLAINING WHAT HIS PURPOSE WAS. 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. HE SAID I WOULD PROBABLY UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY WERE DOING. 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, AND THE ATMOSPHERE WAS MORE OR LESS JUST LIKE WHAT IT WAS ON WEDNESDAY. EVERYONE WAS JUST SITTING AROUND, NOT DRESSED ANY DIFFERENTLY. I FOUND MYSELF LOOKING AROUND FOR SOME OF THE USUAL PARAPHERNALIA THAT I ASSUMED WENT WITH SATANISM, BUT I DIDN'T SEE ANYTHING AT ALL. 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 LIE 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. THE BRICK IS RED AND BROWN AND BLACK. 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 EIGHT 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, AND YOU'RE WALKING BLINDLY THROUGH THE DARK, AND THE SMELL IS TERRIBLE, AND YOU FEEL OUT FOR SOMETHING, ANYTHING, BUT THERE'S NOTHING THERE. 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 DOWNTAIRS. 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. THEY DIDN'T FEEL LIKE ANYTHING, BUT MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS THAT SOMETHING HAD AT SOME POINT BEEN TIED AROUND MY WRISTS, AND KNOTTED TOO TIGHT ON THE INSIDES OF THEM MAYBE. I HAD NO IDEA. 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. AS HE WAS SAYING THIS I WAS LOOKING AT MY WRISTS, AND I KNEW SOMEONE MUST HAVE DONE SOMETHING TO ME. HE SAID HE CARRIED ME HIMSELF TO THE SOFA WHEN HE SAW I WASN'T COMING AROUND. 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. ANY HUMAN CONTACT FELT LIKE I WAS ON A GOOD ISLAND SOMEHOW. SO EVEN THOUGH MY FIRST REACTION WAS TO THINK I DIDN'T WANT TO ASSOCIATE WITH MAURICE ANYMORE, ONLY A LITTLE BIT OF TIME HAD TO GO BY BEFORE I RECONSIDERED. I CONVINCED MYSELF THAT I WANTED TO HAVE MY QUESTIONS ANSWERED, I WANTED TO KNOW WHAT WAS ON THE VIDEOTAPES I HAD SEEN ON THAT SHELF, THE ONES MARKED SO STRANGELY. MAYBE I COULD WRITE A BOOK SOMETIME ABOUT ALL THIS, ABOUT THIS SORT OF PERSON. I FIGURED AS LONG AS I STAYED ALERT AROUND THEM 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 WHICH 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 FRIENDLI-ESS IN HIM SUDDENLY. THE ONLY THING HE REALLY SAID TO ME IN THE BEGINNING WAS 'HOW DID YOU SLEEP?': 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 HIM, '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 FEELNG 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, 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. HE SAID, 'HERE WE ARE, THIS IS WHERE WE'RE 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 BEDSHEETS, TORN UP, HANGING THERE, FLUTTERING IN THE WIND. NO ONE WAS SAYING ANYTHING. MAURICE WAS RIGHT BESIDE ME, AND I SAID 'WHAT DO THE SHEETS MEAN? WHY WERE THEY PUT THERE?' AND HE SAID 'YOU KNOW, WHEN WE DIE, THEY WRAP OUR BODY 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. HE WAS DEAD, JUST LIKE THAT. I READ THAT LITTLE BLURB THREE TIMES. I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. WHEN I LOOKED UP FROM THE PAPER, I LOOKED RIGHT AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE COFFEEHOUSE, AND A MAN WAS COMING THROUGH THE DOOR AT THAT PRECISE MOMENT, AND I SWORE IT WAS HIM, A THIN MAN DRESSED MOSTLY IN BLACK, COMING IN, LOOKING AROUND FOR SOMEONE. BUT OF COURSE IT WASN'T HIM. IN THAT MOMENT, THOUGH, I COULDN'T BREATHE. 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 FURTHER AND FURTHER 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 HOW I HAD GOTTEN INTO THAT ACCIDENT UP IN THE SHENANDOAHS AND 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 FRIENDS WHO TURNED OUT TO BE BAD FOR ME. WHEN I FINISHED EATING WE KEPT TALKING. 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 CAFETERIA, 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 KITCHENS. THEY WERE THE NIGHT LIGHTS. I WAS BASICALLY IN THE DARK, EXCEPT I HAD A FLASHLIGHT WHICH 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 CAFETERIA, 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 NEAR THE KITCHENS, 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 CAFETERIA, 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 CAFETERIA 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 OBVIOUSLY 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 U.P.S. 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 CAFETERIA. 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 THEIR SENSES WERE TELLING THEM 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 CAME UP TO ME AGAIN. 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. HE CAME AROUND AND INTRODUCED HIMSELF AS NED. HE'D FOUNDED THE SHELTER TEN YEARS BEFORE, AND HE 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 WANTED NED TO TELL FATHER HALL TO STOP VISITING HER. SHE 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 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 BEGAN 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 SAID HE KEPT 'APPEARING' IN HER ROOM, 'APPEARING' AT THE FOOT OF HER BED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. THEY THOUGHT SHE NEEDED PSYCHIATRIC CARE. SOMETIMES THE HOMELESS WOMAN CLAIMED THAT FATHER HALL WANTED HER TO COME WORK IN A MISSION, AND SOMETIMES SHE SAID HE WANTED HER TO GO TO A PALACE. SHE SAID CONFLICTING THINGS, AND SHE NEVER KNEW HIS FIRST NAME. SHE 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 UNNDED 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 WHICH HIS FATHER HAD OWNED, AND WHICH 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 SNOW PLOW. 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 UNDOED 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 WEB SITE 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 WEB SITE 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 WEB SITE, 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 SUNK 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 TO HULST 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 WHICH MADE US HATE OR FEAR OR LOVE OR CREATE MUSIC, THERE MUST BE SOME HIDDEN VALVE OR MUSCLE IN THE HEART WHICH 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 HIKE 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 WOODSPEOPLE. • THAT WAS IN 1937. THE WEB SITE 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 GALLOWES.. • 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 SNOW PLOWS 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 AWAYS. 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 LYING ON MY BACK, LOOKING UP, INSIDE A ROOM, BUT THE CEILING WAS JUST FOUR INCHES OR SO FROM MY FACE. THEN I REALIZED THAT IT WASN'T A CEILING I WAS LOOKING AT, IT WAS THE UNDERSIDE OF A BED. I WAS UNDER A BED, IN THE DARK. I TURNED MY HEAD TO THE RIGHT, AND I SAW THREE PEOPLE VERY CLOSE TO ME, HUDDLED, LYING UNDER THE BED, LOOKING AT ME. A COUPLE OF THEM WERE GRINNING AT ME, THERE WERE TWO MEN AND ONE WOMAN. I SAID TO THEM, 'WHERE AM I?' AND THEY SAID 'YOU'RE JUST LIKE US, YOU'RE WAITING TO BE FED'. I SAW THAT THESE PEOPLE WERE THE PEOPLE FROM THE WOODS, THAT NIGHT WHEN THEY'D MADE ME GO THROUGH THEM AGAINST MY WILL. CURTIS WAS THE ONLY NAME I REMEMBERED. NOW THEY WERE NAKED, DEPRAVED, AND I WANTED TO GET OUT OF THERE, BUT I COULDN'T MANEUVER, I WAS BIGGER THAN THEY WERE, AND I COULD BARELY MOVE. CURTIS TOLD ME TO STAY STILL, THAT AS SOON AS THE MAN IN THE BED FELL ASLEEP, WE COULD FEED. I OPENED MY MOUTH A SECOND TIME BUT I COULDN'T SPEAK. THEY LOOKED UP AT THE UNDERSIDE OF THE BED AND THEY WERE TRYING TO HEAR SOMEONE'S

BREATHING. JUST A FEW SECONDS LATER, CURTIS SAID, 'IT'S ALMOST TIME, YOU CAN HEAR IT, WE ONLY HAVE TO WAIT A BIT MORE' AND THEN HE PUT ONE ARM OUT AND GRABBED MY ANKLE. HE HAD TEN FINGERS ON EACH HAND, LIKE STICKS. HIS FINGERNAILS WERE LONG AND SHARP. HE SAID, 'NOW! WE HAVE TO EAT QUICKLY!' AND THE THREE OF THEM SCRAMBLED OUT FROM UNDER THE BED. BECAUSE I THOUGHT THEY WOULD MURDER ME IF I DIDN'T DO AS THEY SAID, I DID TOO. WE WERE IN A DARK BEDROOM AND THE THREE OF THEM GOT TO THEIR KNEES AND THREW THEIR FREAKISH HANDS OVER A FIGURE LYING IN THE BED. I RECOGNIZED HIM RIGHT AWAY. IT WAS PETER. HE NEVER WOKE UP, NO MATTER HOW MUCH SOUND THEY MADE. I DID AS THEY DID, IN THIS DREAM, IN THIS OTHER WORLD, COMPLETELY OUT OF FEAR. IMMEDIATELY THE THREE GRAY-EYED PEOPLE RIPPED INTO THE BLANKET, THEN THROUGH PETER'S SHIRT AND INTO HIS STOMACH, THEY TORE IT RIGHT OPEN, AND THEY GRABBED HIS INTESTINES AND RIPPED THEM OUT AS HE CAME AWAKE AND STARTED TO SHRIEK. OUT OF FEAR I DOVE UPON HIM TOO, AND LET MY HANDS BE COVERED IN BLOOD. THE FEEDERS' HANDS WENT FROM PETER'S STOMACH TO THEIR MOUTHS AS THEY ATE EVERYTHING THEY TORE OUT OF HIM. I PRAYED THAT THEY WOULDN'T SEE ME NOT EATING, BUT CURTIS TURNED ON ME, HALF HIS FACE COVERED IN BLOOD WHILE THE OTHERS TORE PETER APART IN A FRENZY, AND HE SAID TO ME, 'IF YOU WON'T EAT, FRIEND, YOU CANNOT STAY,' AND I WAS ABOUT TO TRY TO RUN AWAY WHEN I WAS SOMEPLACE ELSE AGAIN. IT WAS OUTDOORS. I WAS IN A RUINED CITY, IT LOOKED LIKE A VERY OLD CITY THAT HAD BEEN BOMBED OR DESTROYED SOMEHOW, THERE WAS ALMOST NOTHING BUT THE BURNED REMNANTS OF BUILDINGS ALL AROUND, UP AND DOWN A STREET LITTERED WITH RUBBLE. IT WAS A COLD DAY, COLDER EVEN THAN IT HAD BEEN IN THE REAL WORLD. THERE WERE DARK CLOUDS OVERHEAD AND I WAS WITH A GROUP OF PEOPLE, HIDING BEHIND A BARRICADE THEY'D CONSTRUCTED OUT OF RUBBLE. THERE WERE FOURTEEN OR FIFTEEN PEOPLE HIDING WITH ME. HALFWAY DOWN THE STREET WAS A BELL TOWER, AND INSIDE THE BELL TOWER WAS SOMETHING THE PEOPLE WERE VERY AFRAID OF. ONE BY ONE THEY WERE TRYING TO RUN DOWN THE STREET, PAST

THE BELL TOWER, TOWARD AN OPEN DOOR IN A STOREFRONT WHOSE WINDOWS HAD BEEN SHATTERED BY A BOMB BLAST. I WATCHED AS A YOUNG WOMAN WAS PUSHED FORWARD BEYOND THE BARRICADE, AND SHE BEGAN TO RUN DOWN THE STREET, AND WHEN SHE GOT ONLY ABOUT TWENTY YARDS OUT, I HEARD A RIFLE SHOT AND A SPRAY OF BLOOD LEAPT UP FROM HER LEFT SHOULDER AND SHE COLLAPSED. SOMEONE UP IN THE BELL TOWER UP AHEAD ON THE LEFT SIDE OF THE STREET HAD FIRED DOWN UPON HER. THEN THE NEXT PERSON WENT. THIS TIME IT WAS AN OLD MAN, HE MUST HAVE BEEN SEVENTY YEARS OLD, AND HE COULDN'T RUN VERY WELL AT ALL. HE GOT RIGHT TO THE POINT WHERE THE YOUNG WOMAN HAD FALLEN WHEN ANOTHER SHOT RANG OUT, AND HE WAS HIT IN THE LEFT SHOULDER AS WELL, EXACTLY LIKE THE YOUNG WOMAN HAD, JUST BESIDE THE NECK, AND HE COLLAPSED ALMOST ON TOP OF HER. THERE WAS A LONG SILENCE. THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE BARRICADE WITH ME WERE DECIDING WHAT TO DO, BUT THEY SAW NO CHOICE BUT TO KEEP SENDING ONE PERSON FORWARD. ANOTHER MAN WENT OUT, RUNNING AS FAST AS HE COULD DOWN THE STREET, AND AGAIN, IN THE EXACT SAME SPOT IN THE STREET, INCHES AWAY FROM THE FIRST TWO DEAD BODIES, HE WAS SHOT FROM ABOVE IN THE LEFT SHOULDER, PRECISELY WHERE THE OTHERS WERE. THE BLOOD SPRAYED IN THE SAME PATTERN, THE SHOT MADE THE SAME SOUND. I LOOKED UP AT THE BELL TOWER AND NOTHING COULD BE SEEN UP THERE, THERE WERE TOO MANY SHADOWS. AND I YELLED AT THE PEOPLE WITH ME, I SHOUTED AT THEM TO STOP, DIDN'T THEY SEE WHAT WAS HAPPENING, WE WERE BEING MASSACRED, BUT STILL AGAIN THEY SENT ONE MORE PERSON, AND THIS TIME IT WAS A BOY NO MORE THAN EIGHT YEARS OLD. I REACHED A HAND OUT TO STOP HIM BUT IT WAS TOO LATE. HE RAN FORWARD, HE GOT TO WITHIN INCHES OF THE THREE CORPSES, STARTED TO RUN AROUND THEM, AND THEN HE WAS SHOT FROM ABOVE, AND HE TRIPPED AND FELL FACE DOWN. IT WAS LIKE A FILM BEING RUN AGAIN AND AGAIN, THERE WAS NO VARIATION IN HOW THESE PEOPLE WERE MURDERED, NO DIFFERENCE IN THE LOCATION, THE KIND OF WOUND, AND WHERE THE WOUND APPEARED. THEN THEY TOLD ME IT WAS MY TURN. I REFUSED TO GO, BUT I HEARD A VOICE SAY I HAD TO GO, I HAD

TO, THE ARMIES WERE COMING IN ON US, AND I WAS SUDDENLY SHOVED FORWARD. SO I RAN, I KEPT MY HEAD DOWN AND I RAN, AND I HEARD A SHOT FROM ABOVE ALMOST IMMEDIATELY, AND THEN ANOTHER ONE, THEN ONE MORE, AND I COULD ACTUALLY HEAR THE SNIPER IN THE BELL TOWER PULLING THE BOLT BACK TO FIRE AGAIN AFTER EACH SHOT. I CLOSED MY EYES AND VEERED OFF TO THE LEFT SIDE OF THE STREET, AND WHEN I GOT TO THE SIDEWALK I RAN RIGHT AT THE BELL TOWER. I CRASHED INTO A WOODEN DOOR LEADING INTO IT. THERE WAS A SPIRAL STAIRCASE IN FRONT OF ME, AND I BEGAN TO RUN UP IT, TAKING TWO STEPS AT A TIME. I KNEW THE ONLY WAY TO SURVIVE WAS TO KILL THE SNIPER. I WENT UP, UP, RUNNING OUT OF BREATH, MAYBE SIXTY OR SEVENTY WINDING STEPS, AND THE TOP OPENED RIGHT AT THE BELL, AND I SAW THE SNIPER. HE WAS STANDING ON THE WAIST-HIGH WALL, OVER WHICH WAS A SEVENTY FOOT FALL ONTO THE STREET. HIS GUN WAS GONE, HE WAS JUST A SILHOUETTE AGAINST THE SKY. WHEN I GOT CLOSE TO HIM HE JUMPED OFF THE TOWER. I LOOKED DOWN OVER THE WALL AND HE HAD ALREADY HIT, HE LANDED RIGHT NEXT TO THE PILE OF CORPSES HE'D MADE. THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE BARRICADE WERE COMING OUT, AND THEY SURROUNDED HIM, AND ONE OF THE PEOPLE POINTED UP AT ME, AND HE SAID, 'THAT'S HIM! THAT'S THE KILLER!' AND THE ENTIRE GROUP SWARMED DOWN THE SIDEWALK TOWARD THE DOOR TO THE TOWER. I HEARD THEM A FEW SECONDS LATER, TAKING THE STAIRS, TEN SETS OF FOOTSTEPS RUNNING UP THEM TO GET ME, AND I MYSELF CLIMBED UP ON THE SHORT WALL THAT OVERLOOKED THE TOWN. THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT OF IT, IT HAD ALL BEEN DESTROYED, AS FAR AS I COULD SEE. BEYOND IT WAS AN OCEAN, AND THE SUN WAS BEGINNING TO SET OVER IT. AND WHEN THE MOB REACHED THE TOP OF THE STEPS, I SCREAMED AND JUMPED OFF THE WALL. • FINALLY I WAS IN A ROWBOAT. I WAS STANDING IN IT, BALANCING MYSELF ON THE WAVES OF THE OCEAN I'D SEEN FROM THE BELL TOWER. 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 AN L IN THE SAND WITH THE STICK. HE TURNED TO ME. IT WAS MAURICE. MAURICE LOOKED MUCH HEALTHIER THAN HE HAD IN LIFE, BEFORE HE DIED. HE SEEMED STRONGER, AND HIS SKIN WAS A BETTER COLOR, AS IF HE HAD FINALLY BECOME WHOLE IN DEATH. 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 SWEEPED 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 SAID, 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, BUT THIS TIME WAS DIFFERENT. THIS TIME I WAS SUDDENLY AWARE OF INHABITING A BODY, AND ALL THE SENSES THAT BROUGHT. THE BODY WAS MY OWN, I KNEW IT AT ONCE. I REALIZED THAT EVER SINCE I HAD AWOKEN UNDER THAT BED IN PETER'S ROOM, EVERYTHING I'D SEEN AND HEARD HAD BEEN EXPERIENCED WITHOUT MY BODY, JUST MY MIND, AND NOW I HAD THE BODY BACK AGAIN. 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 WHICH 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 IT WAY TO THE RIGHT,

DISAPPEARED FOR A MOMENT, THEN RE-APPEARED 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 IT'S 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.

MY NAME IS SAMUEL POLLENBY. I AM A TEACHER OF THE DEAF IN WASHINGTON, DC. 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 THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2005. 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 WHICH 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 SEVENTEEN 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 TEN O'CLOCK 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 ON 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 PATTERN, 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 UNMISTAKEABLE 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 LAID 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 TEN 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.

MY NAME IS OLIVER KRAFT. I AM A PATIENT AT ST. ELIZABETH'S HOSPITAL IN WASHINGTON, DC, 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 DC 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 WHICH 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 RE-BURIED 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 DC 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 WHICH 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 RE-BURYING 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.

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 APRIL 10, 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 RE-LIVE 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 THAT 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 STRANGLING 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 NECK 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.

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 TEN 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 WHICH 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 AFRICA 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 GANTT'S TWO CHILDREN IN 1973. GANTT 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. GANTT 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 GANTT 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. 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 HEAVYSET, 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 TEN-THIRTY AND ELEVEN 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. • IN THE DARK LIVING ROOM I TURNED OFF ALL THE HEAT IN THE HOUSE, FOR REASONS I WILL SOON EXPLAIN. I SAT AND OPENED THE NOTEBOOKS DOUD HAD GIVEN ME. IT WAS 11:25 P.M. I BEGAN TO READ THE NOTES HE'D MADE FOR POTENTIAL CASES SINCE JULY. THE FIRST ONE WAS SOMETHING HE'D BEEN STUDYING FOR OVER A YEAR. IN 1992, IN SHREVES, WEST

VIRGINIA, THREE YOUNG DIVINITY STUDENTS DRINKING A BIT HEAVILY AFTER GRADUATION FROM THEIR MASTERS 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 WHICH 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 SHREVES 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. MY COLLEAGUE SAVID DOUD HAD COLLECTED ENOUGH INFORMATION ABOUT THE ENTIRE CASE TO SUGGEST WE FIND THE CABIN SOMETIME WHEN SPRING CAME. IT TOOK ME MORE THAN AN HOUR TO GO THROUGH ALL OF HIS NOTES, READING FROM THEM ONLY BY THE BEAM OF MY FLASHLIGHT. I HEARD THE WIND PICKING UP SEVERELY OUTSIDE THE HOUSE. WITH THE HEAT CUT OFF, THE TEMPERATURE INSIDE THE HOUSE 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 WHICH 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 RE-FOCUSED, 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 WHICH 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. HE MUST HAVE DIED A YEAR OR SO AFTER HIS UNCLE BERNARD. 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 VISIT 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. HE 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 HAD AWOKEN 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 HAD 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 HAD GONE 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 LEAVING THE ABANDONED PROPERTY AND SETTING FOOT ON 41, A SINGLE CAR ROLLED PAST ME. I TRIED TO USE ITS HEADLIGHTS TO SEE FURTHER 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 REGARDS 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 ONE 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, INDEPENDENT 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 NAMETAG UNDERNEATH IT SUGGESTED HE OWNED THE PLACE. I GREETED HIM BUT HE DID NOT IMMEDIATELY RESPOND. HE WAS STARING INTENTLY THROUGH THE WINDOW BLINDS WHICH 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, STRANGLERED 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 WHICH 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. I REACHED INTO THE BACK SEAT AND OPENED MY BACKPACK. I TOOK OUT DOUD'S NOTEBOOKS AND PICKED UP READING WHERE I HAD LEFT OFF. 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. I TOLD MYSELF TO KEEP AN EYE

ON THE ROAD AS I READ DOUD'S NOTES. • HE HAD WRITTEN NEXT OF A POTENTIAL CASE THAT HE SEEMED INTENT ON INVESTIGATING BEFORE ANY OTHER. IT WOULD INVOLVE TRAVELLING TO THE REMOTE TERRITORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN DESERT KNOWN AS THE KABALTRA SANDS, WHICH HAD 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 POINTED TO THE REAL REASON HE HAD COMMITTED HIMSELF TO THE HOSPITAL, REASONS WHICH HE HAD NEVER REVEALED TO ANYONE. THE LETTERS THEMSELVES WERE LUCID AND WELL-WRITTEN. IN THEM, KOTEAN TOLD OF HIS EXPERIENCES IN KABALTRA. HE CLAIMED TO HAVE TAKEN AT LEAST TWO HUNDRED PHOTOGRAPHS ON THE ASSIGNMENT TO KABALTRA. EVERY ONE OF THESE PHOTOS WAS AVAILABLE IN GOVERNMENT FILES EXCEPT FOR NINE, WHICH KOTEAN CONCEALED FROM THE AUSTRALIANS AND WHICH HAD 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 WHICH 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 EXTREME TEMPERATURES. THE MAN WAS WEARING WHAT HAD ONCE BEEN DENIM JEANS AND A LUMBERJACK-TYPE COTTON SHIRT. HE WAS WEARING A WATCH. 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 SWEEPED 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, AND DEVELOPING THE FILM ON HIS OWN. FOR EIGHT MONTHS, KOTEAN HELD ON TO THE PHOTOS, NOT KNOWING WHAT TO DO WITH THEM. THEN ONE DAY HE READ A NEWS REPORT OF A U.F.O. 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 N.A.S.A. RESEARCH BASE IN LOS ALAMOS, WHERE THE COUNTRY'S MOST EXTENSIVE U.F.O. LIBRARY WAS KEPT. MOST OF THE INFORMATION THERE WAS NON-CLASSIFIED. 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 DIED OR DISAPPEARED MYSTERIOUSLY LESS THAN SIX MONTHS AFTER REPORTING A U.F.O. 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 DISAPPEARED FROM THE SOUTH OF FRANCE SHORTLY AFTER SHE CLAIMED TO HAVE HAD HER HOUSE EXPLORED BY MEN WITH CLAWS. KOTEAN'S LETTERS TOOK UP ABOUT TWO HUNDRED PAGES AND WENT INTO GREAT DETAIL ABOUT WHAT HE SAW AND WHAT HE THOUGHT. THE CONCLUSION HE CAME TO WAS THAT THERE WERE BEINGS AND RACES BEYOND SPACE WHO DID NOT WANT MANKIND TO INTRUDE ON THEIR SPHERE OF INFLUENCE, AND WHO HAD PERHAPS PLACED THE BODIES OF THE ABDUCTED IN A SMALL CORNER OF THE EARTH AS A KIND OF WARNING, OR PERHAPS SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY HAD 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 WHICH 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, MY COLLEAGUE DOUD REVEALED, HE CLAIMED TO HAVE SENT THEM TO A CLOSE COUSIN IN NEW YORK; THIS WAS ABOUT SIX MONTHS BEFORE HE DIED. THE COUSIN WAS STILL ALIVE. HIS ADDRESS WAS 141 TROUT HOLLOW, NORTH COLLINS. DOUD HAD WRITTEN TO HIM JUST THREE WEEKS BEFORE BY REGISTERED MAIL. THE LETTER HAD BEEN SIGNED FOR, BUT HE HAD GOTTEN NO REPLY. IF ANOTHER TWO WEEKS WENT BY, DOUD AND I WOULD GO THERE PERSONALLY. DOUD'S NOTES FOR THE CASE TOOK ME ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES TO READ. WHEN I CLOSED THE NOTEBOOK, I DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO RETURN TO THE GAS STATION, TO CONFIRM THAT THE POLICE HAD ARRIVED, TO OFFER MY HELP IF NECESSARY, TO SEE WHAT I COULD SEE. • 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 EMPTIED MY MIND, MADE IT INTO A DEAD BLACK BOX. 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 THUDDING 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 HURTTLED 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 WHICH 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 WHICH 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 WHICH 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 STREET LIGHT 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 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. IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN INSIDE MY LOST BACKPACK. 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 DID NOT KNOW WHY. 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

FURTHER, BECOMING A MUCH THICKER STREAM WHICH 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 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 NON-BEING. 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 WHICH 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 PUTREFACTED SPIRIT OF DONOVAN GANTT. I BEGGED GOD TO RELEASE ME, TO

LET ME DIE. HE DID NOT ANSWER ME. • WHEN SAVID DOUD DID NOT RECEIVE A PHONE CALL FROM ME AT SIX 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 WHICH WOULD DELIVER THE BOOKS HE HAD BEEN PROMISED BY HIS BRILLIANT FATHER, BOOKS WHICH 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.

THE DICTATES OF KNIFEPOINT HORROR

- 1) The story must be told in the first person, and begin with a simple statement of the narrator's name.
- 2) There can be no entry into the minds or voices of characters other than the narrator's.
- 3) No standard exchanges of dialogue can be included.
- 4) Regardless of the length of the story, there can be no chapter, sectional, or even paragraph breaks. It must be revealed in the uninterrupted grammar of someone who simply cannot stop until the story is fully told. Changes in a line of thought can only be noted by a simple mark between sentences.
- 5) Extensive descriptions of settings or characters which do not propel the story forward are anathema to knifepoint horror. The genre focuses entirely on the unfolding of the story's essential spine.
- 6) The story must be written so that it authentically mimics the sound of one person relating a chain of events to another through a rudimentary personal confession, single long journal entry, or oral account. Literary devices such as extended flashbacks, non-linear structures, diary or epistolary formats, or other unusual techniques dilute the intent of knifepoint. Forbidden are such tools as prologues and epilogues, one-sentence paragraphs designed for shock or suspense value, introductory quotes, asides, and any hint of humor or romance.
- 7) The story must be told entirely in cold, emotionless uppercase letters.
- 8) The story can have no title.

SOREN NARNIA is the author of *Song of the Living Dead*, *Witherheart*, and several other books.