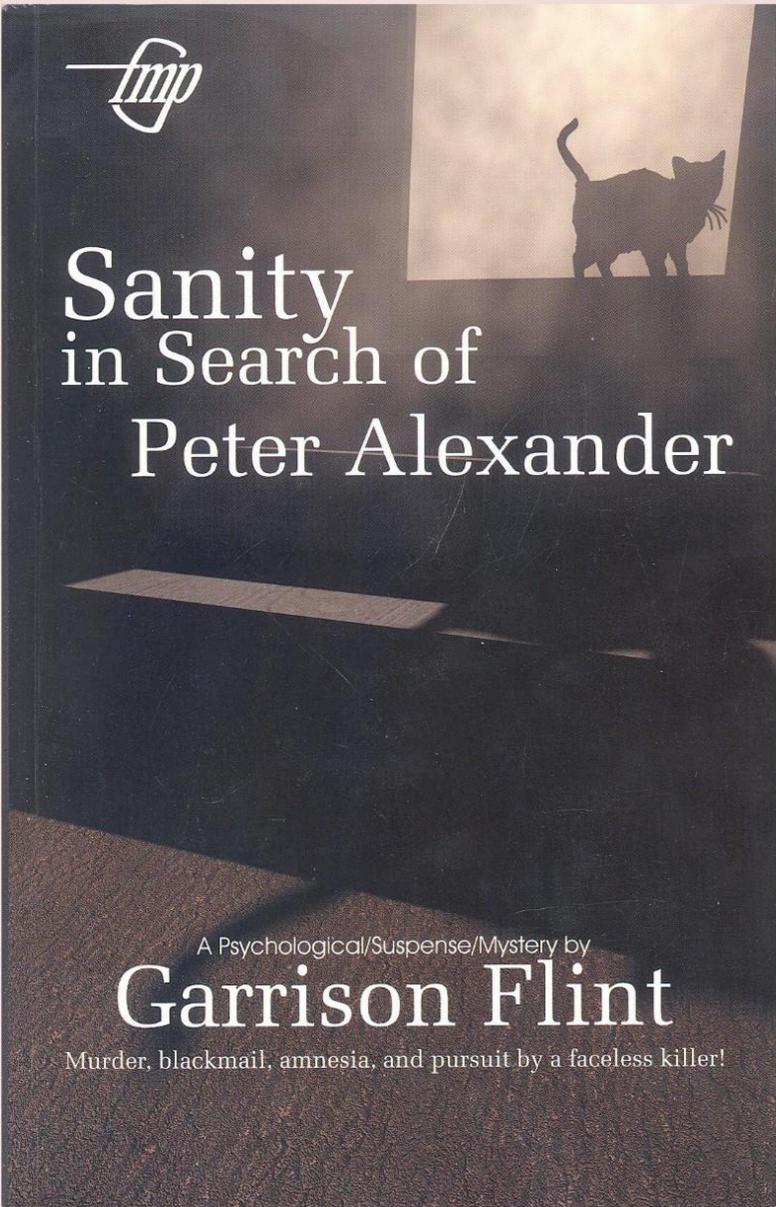


The logo for IMP (International Mystery Press) is a stylized, cursive 'imp' in white, enclosed within a white circle.The book cover features a dark, moody photograph of a room. A silhouette of a cat is perched on a ledge in the upper right, looking out a window where a bright, hazy light is visible. The rest of the room is in deep shadow, with a dark wooden surface and a textured rug in the foreground.

# Sanity in Search of Peter Alexander

A Psychological/Suspense/Mystery by

## Garrison Flint

Murder, blackmail, amnesia, and pursuit by a faceless killer!



# **SANITY IN SEARCH OF PETER ALEXANDER**

**A psychological/suspense/mystery novel**

**by**

**Garrison Flint**

**Family of Man Press**

**Revision**

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## **DEDICATION**

*To those in our number  
who are able to control the insanity within  
just enough to strike a balance  
between unfettered creativity  
and requisite social acceptability.*

## Chapter One: *The Darkness*

During moments of abstract, philosophic, contemplation I can accept the fact that in the universal scheme of things I am fully insignificant - a trillionth of a speck on the face of time and space. During the rest of my life, however, I am the one part of that universe in its historical sweep that is all important to me. It is the part I value the most and understand the best. At least that's how it was up until a few days ago. Suddenly questions grow.

Can it be that I'm a killer? Perhaps, though I can't envision that. Can it be that someone has reason to hurt me - to want me dead, even? Perhaps, though I recall no enemies or horrendous deeds. Can it be that I'm slowly slipping into insanity? Perhaps. Possibly. Probably. I don't know. I can't be certain. The past few days have brought everything into question. Trepidation has become my Master.

Is the madman ever aware of that moment when his notion of reality inches through the rift of no return? I have read that madness always serves a purpose. What purpose could my impending madness serve? To wrap me in a blanket of invincibility, protecting me from the fury of the cold and terrifying darkness rushing to engulf me? It is so cold and terrifying.

Confusion! I recognize my confusion. Madness works to alleviate confusion by reshaping the rules of reality to bend things right. As distressing as it is, this confusion confirms that I am still sane. I must cling to my confusion - nurture it even, if I am to sort through and survive this terror.

How will I know, then, when the accurate solution to all

of this has arrived, for the answer must clear the confusion and present the certainty I am seeking. Will that certainty represent the dependable logic of reality or the illusory comfort of lunacy? Perhaps all certainty is insanity. Perhaps the only sane state is that of confusion or at least the unswerving recognition that legitimate alternatives to every position always exist.

The would-be writer/philosopher in me seems strong this evening. I must re-focus and get to the purpose of this journal. I must not over-think. I must not deep-think. I must relate, sort and organize. Later I can understand.

In the following pages, I will attempt to reconstruct the unnerving events and feelings of the past few weeks. I must determine if there is any sense to be made of them - any answers to be gleaned from them. No! I must determine **WHAT** sense there is to be made of them and **WHAT** answers are to be gleaned from them. I am depending on this manuscript to construct some truth - provide some prospect.

As my terror rushes toward despair - probably on route to the eventual quietude of depression - I find myself all too ready to welcome whatever fate may await me. Just let it come to an end - some end - any end. I must keep such temptation in rein.

In the beginning, sleep brought relief but during the days just past even that once dependably safe sanctuary has been relentlessly invaded. As I succumb to exhaustion each evening, my daytime torture slips seamlessly into my nighttime terror.

I suppose I have never before been required to be brave. Without threat, there can be no bravery. I am unpracticed. My thirty plus years of bubble enveloped existence - essentially uneventful, sheltered, safe - seems to have prepared me poorly for this moment. I curse my parents for having protected me so well; yet I love them dearly for it - may they rest in peace. Confusion. I embrace you, wonderful, consoling, sanity-affirming, confusion.

This is the record as I recall it. I've been over it all so many times in my mind. That has undoubtedly worked against the clarity of this presentation. I am reminded of the childhood game we called "Gossip". The group sat in a circle. The leader

read, to the person next to him (in a private whisper), a short description of some event. Carried on whispers around the circle, each one retold it to the next one until the story arrived back with the leader who then presented both the event as he had received it and the way it was in its original form. They were never the same; even the essence seldom truly resembled the original. Now, I fear that I may have been inadvertently playing that game within my mind and have to wonder how my many repetitions have distorted things. I have read that it is the unspoken scourge of the talk-it-out therapies - repetition until the problem assumes a distorted, though more easily treatable form, consequently leaving the original matter, restlessly buried, intact, and insidiously active.

I can't seem to keep focused on the events. It began on April second, the first day of my vacation - no, that's not accurate. That's where the story does seem to begin but my awareness of it began the day of my return to work at the bookstore. That would have been April tenth.

I remember awakening that morning, eyes still closed, confused about where I was. The condition intrigued me, so I didn't peek, preferring to think it out. Try as I would, I found no answer. I opened my eyes and my life rushed back into focus - well, partly. I can't explain it but there was something so very appealing about those moments in limbo; in some way, during that brief period, I felt extricated from all responsibility. I knew I was Peter Alexander and that I was the manager of the *Oak Leaves Bookshop*. I just didn't know where I was. It was more fascinating than frightening - more congenial than unfriendly. Perhaps limbo is the positive equivalent of depression. There I go again.

I got out of bed, teased by the thought that something still was not right. I went through my morning ritual - showered, shaved and dressed. I turned on the Weather Channel as I downed a bowl of Honey Oat cereal - widely touted this month as the heart friendly way to begin your day. Next month it will be something else. I know that. It's a good news/bad news thing. The bad news is you really can't trust even research-based medical theories. The good news is that during any given decade you get to enjoy a wide variety of foods.

I was amused that I misread the date on the TV screen, so I donned my glasses. Come to find out I had not misread it. How could the producer have allowed such an error to occur, I wondered, and figured their switchboard was undoubtedly well lit up about it.

I opened my date book to get a feel for my next ten hours or so. It opened to April 2<sup>nd</sup> as it should have, despite the TV's continuing error. I was immediately puzzled. The entry there read, "Vacation at cabin." I read on through the next six days - each one having a series of cryptic entries about things it seemed I had done during that suddenly vanished vacation. I stood up - for no apparent reason - and went to look out my second-floor window, again, for no apparent reason. At least it looked to be April outside and it did seem to be Springfield.

Yes! I recalled, as the essence of a memory struggled to rebuild itself, I was to have gone on vacation that week; the problem was that I had no specific recollection of it. If it were the eleventh rather than the second, and the TV had been right about that, I needed to be getting to the shop. Cindy opened Mondays so that was covered. How could I pull myself together and go, having just lost nine days out my life?

It was at that moment that this abiding, implacable, terror took possession of me. More than just a reaction to the void, it was something akin to that dread-filled feeling I experienced as a boy while I walked home from school knowing my Father had already received a call from the principal about my most recent misdeed. It was worse this time, of course, because I had no transgression to which it could be tied. I could concoct no excuses (at which I had become quite skilled as a lad!). I could not plead the lack of fairness (usually good for some abatement in the degree of the ensuing punishment since Father, himself, had previously known the injustices of old Principal Schultz). I could not place blame elsewhere (the bullies and patsies were gone from my life). It came down to a one-on-one between me and this unattached, gut wrenching, all-encompassing, feeling of dread. Perhaps dread is not the correct word - anxiety, alarm, fear, guilt - they are all mixed in; yes, I believe that's dread.

But back to that day. [As I recreate interchanges with

people I will do my best to quote the conversations and describe the situations accurately.]

I decided to go to work. If I had been gone an entire week my presence would be needed. I packed a lunch - peanut butter and raspberry jelly sandwich and an apple - and went down to the garage. My car was not there. I looked out front on the street where I sometime park for short periods. It was not there. I searched my pocket for the key. It was not to be found either. How could I have lost my car? Perhaps it had been stolen.

Jane - Jane Mason, a teacher who lived in 1-A of our little, redbrick, six-apartment building - emerged from her door. I greeted her.

“Morning Jane. Pretty day.”

“It is that. I’m ready for a steady diet of these. How about you?”

“Oh, yes. I’m ready.”

It had been meaningless prattle - well, no, it was our way of saying, ‘You’re an important person in my life and I always have time for you.’ Just the same it hadn’t helped me that morning. I pressed a bit.

“Jane, do remember seeing my car yesterday? I’m afraid it’s been stolen.”

“I saw you arrive in that beat up old truck last evening. Was it stolen before you got home?”

“Yes. Before then.”

“No. I can’t say I saw it at all. I figured you were still away on vacation. How was it, by the way?”

I stammered.

“Oh, okay, okay. A good vacation. Just what the old head needed.”

“That’s great,” she said. “I need to get going. Can I give you a lift?”

“Thanks, but no. It’s just a few blocks. I had really planned on walking this fine day anyway.”

A blatant lie but I needed to be alone.

“Hope they can find it for you soon. It’s a shame,” she said, referring to the police retrieving my car. She turned and stepped off toward the rear of the building.

I walked the seven blocks down Oak Street to the

bookshop arriving at 9:01. The blinds were up, lights on, and the door open. Reliable old Cindy - the always energetic, redheaded mother of three likewise redheaded and eternally energetic little boys - had things under control. (There just may be a genetically based good news/bad news story in there somewhere!)

“Hey, Pete! Welcome back. How was the vacation?”

It was a refrain I would hear repeated dozens of times that day.

“Good to be back. The time away was great!”

I even made it sound convincing. It would be honed a bit during the day but the message remained the same each time.

“What’d you do up there at your cabin?”

“Orgy - 24/7,” I said, taken aback even as the words left my mouth.

“So you wrote, mostly, huh?” she said, clearly taking my remark for what it was worth - apparently nothing.

“How’s the book coming?”

“Slow but sure,” I said, figuring that covered all aspects of it.

“You’ve been saying that for six months. When do I finally get to begin taking peeks at it?”

“Soon. Soon.”

I remembered the book at least - just not if I had worked on it during that past week.

“So, you’re feeling better than when you left, are you?” she asked as she counted the change into the register.

It indicated that I had been feeling in some way poorly. It rang no bell for me so again I faked it.

“Much. Thanks. Just needed that time away from it all.”

My fully meaningless response seemed to satisfy her. Either that or she was too well-mannered to press.

“You walked this morning, huh? Exercise always makes me feel better when I got the blues,” she said with a firm nod.

“Too nice a day not to.”

I hesitated at mentioning about my car’s disappearance. I also got my first hint about what had been wrong with me - the blues. Before I could give further consideration to either, she spoke.

“Oh, by the way, there’s a big brown envelope back on the desk for you. Found it on the floor by the door this morning. Shoved through the mail slot over the weekend, I guess.”

“An envelope for me. Thanks. I’ll take a look. Anything I need to be aware of around here?”

“Not really. Mrs. Franconi’s book was backordered by the publisher. She’ll be steamed about it but then if not that it would be something else.”

I nodded and made my way back to the desk in the office. I couldn’t have known it, of course, but it was that envelope that would make my murky situation blatantly official.

Inside was a message, written in letters cut from a newspaper and pasted to a sheet of typing paper. Its message was to the point.

“I saw you kill HIM. I have it on GREY video Tape. have NOT decided whether To Do the Same *to you* or just suck you DRY Financially. maybe Both. LATER.”

I re-read it. That would certainly seem to help account for my discomfort - provided it was somehow true. Who did who see me kill? How? Where? When? Captured on tape? Grey Tape?? The message was overwhelming even though it brought no images to mind - no memory of the suggested event. My stomach churned. It probably would have done that whether or not the note contained any element of truth. Regardless, it appeared that I was being blackmailed and that the blackmailer held all the cards.

He - or it could be she, I guess - knew I worked at the bookshop. Suddenly I was glad I hadn’t reported my car stolen to the police. It didn’t seem the right time to have them poking around in my life. That also meant I would not be able to receive help from them in terms of the note - fingerprints or whatever police do in such cases. I was on my own.

I am resourceful, after a fashion. I would begin an investigation of my own. I suppose there was no choice about that. I know books and writing and printing. I would begin there. The type face in the note was Arial - ten point Arial. We kept copies of newspapers for our patrons to peruse while they sipped drinks from our beautiful, old, pewter, coffee urn.

Springfield, a town of fewer than ten thousand inhabitants, had only one small paper, the Gazette. We also subscribed to a dozen others. I often began my day with coffee and a paper. So I did that day - coffee, a paper, and a handful of Tums.

I soon realized my hunt would be a short one. The Gazette was set in ten point Arial - unusual among present day papers. I looked at the message I had received and made some notes. Four words were in all capital letters. Eight others were capitalized. Three were italicized and they had been cut as a string of words; they had occurred together in the publication - *to you or*. One was oversized and bold as if taken from an ad, perhaps. All I needed to do was to find the edition of the paper that had that string of words in it, in italics, and I would know about when it had been constructed - or would I. Probably an unnecessary exercise. How would that help? On the other hand, if it I could find the paper out of which the words had been physically cut - the paper with holes in it - that might give me a clue to the person who was behind it.

I began going through the back issues of the Gazette there in the shop. They were all intact back through the three-week period we kept. No help. Well maybe. It wasn't someone who had used the bookstore editions. No. That really wasn't much help. To read every word in every paper would take days and in the end would only substantiate that the Gazette was the paper used. It wouldn't tell me whose copy of the paper had been used, which seemed the essential element.

I needed to get back out to the cabin. If that was where I had been, then that was where the blackmailer (I'll begin referring to him or her as BM to save space and effort - how ironically appropriate by the way.) would have been. Maybe the old codger who lives in the cabin by the stream would have seen something. Or, maybe he's the BM. He's always so friendly. What's his name? Gus? Charlie? Chance! Yes, Chance.

It meant I needed a car. I called to rent one. They would deliver it at the end of the work day - for me two pm on Mondays. [I was moderately disappointed when it arrived without its widely touted, brown paper wrapper!]

I decided to fib about my own car. I needed an easy

explanation for the rental.

“I was in a fender bender and it’s in the shop. They say three days but I’ll bet on more like a week,” I told Cindy.

She raised her eyebrows and nodded her head in agreement, accepting it straight out.

I wasn’t particularly effective at the bookshop that day. I waited on customers and had three mis-rings on the register. Since I was the one who corrected such things it was no big deal but Cindy knew about them. I wondered what she thought. It was sometime during that day when I began being suspicious of others. Now, I don’t seem to trust anybody, but I’m getting ahead of the story.

Two o’clock came and I left. (You do have to take the car delivery guy back to the rental agency, by the way!) So, it was nearly 2:30 before I was on the road. My cabin is only twenty miles from my front door, but the last five are narrow gravel roads which wind through a seldom trod valley, fording and re-fording a shallow, rocky, stream - The West Fork - and then curling up and around a pine mantled hillside. The cabin sits high, overlooking the valley, the stream, and the pristine woodlands to the west. I love it up there. Beautiful. Comfortable. Simple. Safe.

The cabin has just one, large room with a wide, plank-floored, front porch where I enjoy writing. On nice days, I virtually live on the porch. There is a cat - not mine and where it stays when I’m not around I don’t know. I call him Cat and assume that he calls me Man or Human or some such Cat-speak appellation. He eats what I eat and dependably rewards my stroking with his low-pitched, gurgling, purr. There needs to be a word set aside which is reserved just to describe the internal ambiance that overtakes one as you watch a fire dancing in a fireplace; view a distant, gently tumbling, waterfall; or stroke a soft, warm, purring kitten in your lap. Either Cat has other human contacts or he assumes I’m just another wild beast. He never spooks or bolts in my presence. On occasion, he’s tried to get romantic with my lap top. I know. I don’t either.

I stopped at Old Man Chance’s place. He always seems to be fishing (and has never made advances toward my laptop!). He had a stringer to share with me which I gladly

accepted, having made no provisions for food that evening. It was a strange but helpful conversation. Well, helpful if it reflected the facts.

“Chance. How’s it going?”

“Goin’ fine. Didn’t expect to see you out here so soon after the accident.”

Ah ha. Accident. I must somehow milk this for information that he will assume I already know.

“Get right back in the saddle, you know,” I said wondering what it meant but somehow thinking Chance would understand. He seemed to.

“Gonna try to salvage anything from the remains?”

“You know, that’s one of the reasons I stopped by. Since then I seem to be pretty confused about just how it all came about, you know?”

It seemed important to add a healthy sprinkling of ‘you know’s’ when conversing with Chance. It somehow made you more akin, you know?

“I can believe that. You took a awful blow to the back of your head.”

I reached back and felt the area. Oh yes! It hurt, alright. How had I missed that while shampooing and combing? Perhaps it had run through my thoughts. I’d been in a strange, detached, state of mind that morning.

“Still sore. I’ll live, though.”

Let’s see where that leads.

“Well, it’s a miracle you lived through that crash. Still can’t figure how it happened. You?”

“Nope. Like you said, a miracle. What’s your take on it?”

“I’d bet your foot feed got stuck. You shot off that cliff at sixty plus. Like I said, it was a miracle you survived.”

As he spoke he had turned and pointed to the hill just opposite the one on which my cabin sat. I could see the road running along the edge of what could be considered a cliff, I supposed.

“Been over to look at it?” I asked.

“Just when I came and found you. Glad to help if you want to go back in and see what’s left. Need a high sittin’, old wreck of a pickup like mine to get in and out. Still surprised it

didn't burn, you know? Can't figure that one."

"Would you have time now? I don't want to impose, understand."

"Hard to impose on an old man who has to catch the same fish over and over just for something to do. Sure I have time. Tie that stringer at the pier. I'll help you clean 'em when we get back."

Chance had always been pleasant - waving as I passed, saying 'Howdy' when I got within ear shot - but this was by far the most extended conversation I had ever held with the man - well, that I remembered. It would appear that he had rescued me and driven me home - if his story were to be believed and apparently, it could be. Jane said she had seen me arrive at the apartment the night before riding in an ancient looking pick-up. Clearly, he feels some bond exists at this point. I have to assume it does.

It was a slow, meticulous, fifteen-minute drive over rocks and around boulders and fallen tress trunks to the site of the accident - no, 'accident' is not the term. The 'crash'. Whatever accident there may have been had taken place forty feet up the hill on the cliff road.

I had to agree with the old man. How in the hell could I have survived such a crash?

"I take it you must have seen the car go off the road," I asked more than stated.

"Yup. The late afternoon sun turns them pine trees a hundred shades of yellows and greens. Love to watch them shimmer in the sunset."

Shimmer in the sunset. I must keep that and use it sometime.

"Did you hear anything?"

"Just the thud when you hit. I kept watching, thinking there'd be a ball of fire. There wasn't. I got over as fast as I could."

"And I'll never be able to thank you enough for that, Chance." Admittedly it was an afterthought but it had been sincere.

We walked around the wreckage. No sign of a fire. I sniffed down the hole which should have been covered with the

gas cap. Very little odor suggesting the gasoline was gone. Had it seeped away since the crash or had the tank been empty before the crash?

“Want me to get your bag,” Chance asked, pointing to passenger’s side of the front seat.

I went to see what he was referring to. It appeared to be a school boy’s back pack - clearly not of recent vintage. The window glass was gone so I reached in to retrieve it, but it was stuck. Closer inspection revealed that it had been secured in place by the seat belt which had, at some point, been severed from the chest strap. My guess was they had been cut apart prior to the accident. It made me wonder if it had, indeed, been an accident.

It made me wonder many things, actually, and I will recount several of them in my next installment.

## Chapter Two: *Soldiers, Photos, and Coincidence*

After dislodging and removing the back pack, I returned with Chance to his place, greeted there, surprisingly, by Cat. He seemed quite at home sprawled out on the pier, eyeing the captive supper awaiting him on the stringers tied there. He looked at Chance. He looked at me. Something was clearly not as it should be. He stood and arched his back. Unable to decide to whom he should go, he circled twice, sat back down and returned to guarding the catch.

Chance saw my interest in the cat.

"I call him 'Little Man' 'cause he's quite the man with the ladies. I hear him serenading them most every night. They must come from miles around to enjoy his company - no females live anywhere near here. Always thought it was the other way around, you know? He must be quite the man."

And quite confused, I thought - me calling him Cat and Chance calling him Man. Oh well, he seemed to have survived the linguistic dilemma. Perhaps the names are interchangeable in cat language. The fish were soon cleaned and Cat feasted on parts I won't even mention here. Chance continued to chat.

"It's really strange, you know?" he said looking off at the cliff across the valley.

"Strange?" I asked - my way of urging him to continue his thought.

"That two accidents like that should happen at that very same spot up there."

"Two accidents?"

My interest was captured and I would pursue it more

forcefully if necessary. It wasn't.

"About twenty-five, maybe thirty years ago a car went off that same place."

The old man sniffed.

"A little tyke wasn't so lucky that time."

"A child was killed," I asked?

Chance chose to nod. He would have choked on words.

"My. How terrible. Yes. That would seem to be strange considering how few cars must travel that road. Must be a particularly dangerous turn. It leads up to a camp ground. I've been there - a nice, quiet spot."

"Yup. County property. Poorly maintained some say. Rustic, like God intended, I say. Not many visitors anymore. People just don't camp like they used to. Don't appreciate Mamma Nature no more."

I smiled at his take. He nodded and rolled what fish he felt I'd need in a brown grocery sack, carefully placing it in my hand.

"Well, glad to see you're okay," he said. "Let me know if I can help again."

It seemed to be his signal that it was time for me to move on. At least I acted on it as if it were.

"And thank you for your assistance yesterday and again this afternoon," I said, shaking his extended hand.

He nodded and patted my arm.

"And for the fish," I added as he turned away.

He nodded again and raised his hand over his head as he made his way back toward his cabin. Cat took off for the underbrush, perhaps to make Sir Little Man available for his harem.

I continued on up to my cabin. It was going on six and I was hungry. I really wanted to drive to the other hill and take a look around the cliff road. It would soon be dark. Some other time. Perhaps in the morning before heading back to town. I also wanted to find out what mysteries or answers the still inexplicable backpack might hold.

I chuckled as I pulled to a stop in front of my cabin. There on the porch sat Cat, cleaning himself in all the unmentionable places that cats seem to clean. Perhaps if we humans were that

shameless, our species would be a good deal better off. He stood and jumped up onto the swing expecting, it seemed, that since his tummy was full it was undoubtedly time for some stroking and purring. I'm still not sure how he arrived ahead of me although I am quite sure none of that has anything to do with the serious intent of this entry. Focus!

Inside, I lit the kerosene lanterns, placed the backpack on the table and unzipped its flap. The air was considerably cooler up on the hill top than it had been down in the valley. I took time to light a fire and went to close the door. Cat sat on the threshold looking in and out as if wondering which offered him the promise of the best evening's entertainment. Upon spying my laptop case he chose to come in. I chuckled out loud, shaking my head.

"Thank you, Cat, for bringing me some relief from my nightmare. Yell when you want out."

An inane question flashed through my mind. "Could the cat be some alien spy somehow mixed up in all of this?"

It was dismissed as readily as it had been formed, but was a precursor of the paranoia that was soon to follow. I returned to the backpack and carefully removed its contents. I recognized each piece, though more in a generic than a specific sense. It had clearly belonged to a young boy - pre-school, maybe as old as six. There were lead soldiers, long yearning for fresh paint. There were a small truck and car; a tank and roughly used plastic army men well beyond a new paint job. On the bottom were several pictures of children.

As I said, it all looked familiar as to type but held no personal attachment - no specific memories. Why was it attached to my front seat? How had it got there? Had it been there prior to the accident? I don't remember ever having seen it before.

Would the accident have been connected to the BM note? Had I killed someone during the accident - causing me to swerve off the road perhaps? It made some sense - well it could make sense if supported. I would have thought seeing the car and hearing the old man's account of what happened would have rung some bell, but the week remained a black, dark hole in my mind. Where were those memories? Why had they

taken leave?

Perhaps it had been the blow to my head. I know such trauma can cause a form of transient, temporary amnesia. Sure. That must explain it. It makes sense. I can expect it all to return little by little. Within days or weeks, I should understand. I needed to be patient. I wanted to believe that. I didn't believe it. Why not? And, would the BM give me that much time?

I fixed the fish. Cat had some of the really good parts for dessert. He seemed pleased but still asked to be excused. I locked the door after him - something I never do. I lowered the flames in one lantern and blew out the other. I would sleep with the light that night. I slipped out of my clothes and lay back on the bed. I was soon asleep. The dreams - if they can even rightfully be called that - returned from the previous night. I understand now that they had been present just before that void to which I had awakened. They exhibited no form - no story or vision. They simply left me sapped. It is as if their singular purpose was to renew my level of dread and heighten my sense of foreboding.

That night the usually welcome, soothing, gentle breeze was unnerving. Time and again the simple crackling of the helpless, dying fire startled me into consciousness. The shadows were unfriendly the way they are for every small child who finds himself way down the hall from the security of his parents' reassuring presence. Even Cat's periodic wailing assumed a malevolent, human-like presence.

Sleep had finally come but seemed too soon destroyed by the robins' relentless cheerfulness just outside the window. I dressed and nibbled my way into a dry, though eventually chewy, granola bar. I carefully avoided peeking at its expiration date.

Cat arrived ready for a long day's nap but was willing to first lick clean the last of the milk which I poured into his bowl to empty the expired carton. He'd eat anything I sat before him. I'm not sure if that's because he trusts me implicitly or if he has an adventuresome nature that urges him to try anything once. In either instance, he and I are certainly different.

I closed the door and Cat took custody of a suitable spot

on the steps where the morning sun would creep its way across his length for many hours. I drove to the cliff on the other hill.

It was a poorly maintained road - sparse remnants of gravel atop shiny, hard, black dirt. It had been cut out of the side of the hill by WPA workers in the 1930's. 'Thanks, guys.' It made one complete circle of the hill on its way from bottom to top. It was the highest hill in the area with a broad, flat, meadow on top. A smattering of grand, old, oak and maple trees proved shade and climbing branches which endeared the area to family campers.

As a small boy, I had been there on several occasions with my parents. I couldn't be sure I had found the exact spot where we camped but pretended it was, and with a well charred stick I poked at the long cold ashes within the low circle of rocks. As I remembered those happy times I also relived the harsh smell of the heavy, damp, green canvas umbrella tent and heard the syncopated tapping of rain drops against the fabric as I snuggled in my sleeping bag at night. I remembered how safe it felt there, cozied between my parents. How I yearned for such a feeling again.

I drove slowly on my way back down the road, searching for some indication of where my car had gone out of control - out of control unless I had intentionally driven myself over the side. Cindy had remarked that I had been feeling blue - no indication of how blue. Try as I would I could dredge up no recent memories of being there - not up in the campground and not there on the road.

I found the spot. A clump of brush had hidden it from view on my way up, but there it was, tire tracks in the dirt and well-skinned saplings still bearing the wet grease wiped from the underside of the car as it had careened overhead. I stood there expecting some emotional flood to well up inside me. It didn't. No memory. No emotion. Just a beautiful view on a very pleasant April morning. In the distance below, I saw Chance busying himself on the pier in front of his cabin.

Disappointed, I returned to town. I had lingered too long on the hillside so went directly to the bookshop. Another big, brown envelope awaited me. Unlike the view from the hillside, its very mention did produce a flood of emotions.

Cindy made some crack about my getting things in plain brown wrappers, which, under other circumstances probably would have been worth a prolonged chuckle and some marginally risqué teasing. I hurried it back to the desk and opened the securely glued and taped flap. I was shaking. My lower lip trembled. Predictably, it contained another note. Again, it had been cut from the same paper.

“looked INTO your Finances. Not enough 2 bother with so I’ll just KILL YOU instead. - you naughty BOY!”

I returned it to the envelope and put it into my lock drawer. The day dragged by. I was uncharacteristically short with several of our perennially irritating regular customers - browsers, actually. They drank our coffee, read our books and left, *sans* purchase. I closed at precisely five and drove home - being extra cautious at intersections and finding myself glancing about at stoplights. For what, I wasn’t sure.

As I pulled into the garage, my attention was drawn to the little dumpster where we deposited our trash. After parking, I went to investigate. It was low and narrow with a lightweight plastic lid. I looked inside and was moved - no, more like driven - to begin going through the rubbish. The search produced the worst or best of all possible finds - newspapers from which words had been cut.

The rush of fear suggested it had been the worst of finds; the knowledge that those notes may have come from someone in the apartment building suggested progress. Finally, I had a place to begin.

I secreted the papers under my jacket and was soon locked securely inside my apartment. I closed the drapes and spread the papers on the kitchen table suddenly realizing that without complete copies for comparison, I had nowhere to go in my investigation. Mine had gone to the recent Boys’ Club paper drive.

I called Jane downstairs to see if she had her back copies. She did - at least back a week or so - and said I could have them. I contrived a project at the bookshop which required old newspapers. A few minutes later they were secure with me back in my kitchen. I found the edition that had been used.

Then I searched for the intact pages which matched each hole and I circled the area that had been removed. The words were all there. I had the papers that had been used for both notes. I wanted to feel some kind of relief or closure. I didn't.

That was when this rampant paranoia began ruling my life. Who could I trust? Who should I suspect? In such a life and death predicament you can trust no one. Well, Jane, perhaps, but then if she had created the notes she probably would not have used her own papers. You see how I am thinking. There is always some easy reason for not trusting someone.

I need to back up. I must search for actual enemies or people I may have wronged - people whose names would have come to mind before this sweeping suspicion overtook me. That, I quickly learned, becomes an unimaginably difficult task when you are consumed by such thoroughgoing mistrust - to sort the likely from the remotely possible.

I'm a nice guy. So far as I can remember I've always been a nice guy, not so much because I'm altruistic but because I need to have other people like me - or is it that I don't want people to dislike me? Interesting. Regardless, way back as a kid I won the American Legion Citizenship award in junior high. That may have been the first time - the only time - in the history of the World that a junior high age boy ever won a good citizen award. The point is, I just don't make enemies - I never have.

So, assuming that is true, the threats are probably from some opportunist. Someone who just happened to have his camera running at the moment I did, whatever terrible deed it is that I did. If he didn't know me he had to locate me. If all of this began at the time of the accident - and I guess I really don't know that it did - then he could have followed the pickup as Chance drove me home. It could be Chance, of course. I wonder if he reads. He passed the drivers' test so I assume he reads. At least I assume he has a drivers' license - I probably didn't require him to show it to me before I got into his truck.

If I had hit someone up on the hill, wouldn't Chance have seen that as well? Okay. Let's try another tack. I live here with five other single people. I found the papers in our trash bin. That suggests the BM could well be somebody right here.

Perhaps it also suggests that the deed in question occurred near here within easy sight of one of them. It may have had nothing to do with my accident.

There is always the chance that the BM planted the papers in the dumpster to cast suspicion on this group. How would he have known I'd search the dumpster? That's a question I'll probably never be able to answer so let me move on, although it lends credence to the idea it was someone right here. Maybe he or she lives nearby and can see into my apartment and saw something happening in here.

I went to the windows and drew back the drapes a few inches to check out that theory. There were several two-story houses that could fill that bill but they were all half a block away down Maple Street and I seldom leave my drapes open - well, not in the evening.

Still, what is it I have done - or what is it that person thinks I did. Hey! Maybe he has me confused with somebody else. If only he would have given me some way to contact him. I suppose that dropped out of the plan when he found I wasn't good for blackmail money. Why is he playing the vigilante? Why is what I did so important to him? Of course, when I say him I know it could be her.

So, what do I know about the people here in the apartments? I've been here seven years and only Jane has been here longer - well Jane and Gus the seventy plus year old grumpy, snoop of a building manager. He's single. Talks about dozens and dozens of jobs he's held making me think he's never been responsible enough to hold one. He is divorced - his ex shows up the first of every month like clockwork. I imagine just to receive alimony. It's not that she's unattractive - well, yes, it is. From a distance one might mistake her for a well-used, heavyweight sparring partner. Gus says they split due to incompatibility. I just imagine it was a case in which he had no income and she wasn't patable. Anyway, he's always peeking through the curtains to see what's going on - either he doesn't realize folks on the outside can see him standing there in his boxers and coffee stained undershirt or he doesn't care. He seems to take some perverse pleasure in making his monthly inspections of the apartments. He's hard to explain.

When I deliver my rent check each month, he always holds it up to the light and studies it. Not sure how that tells him anything but I suppose he may feel it puts him in the drivers' seat - makes it known he's in charge or has to pass on its authenticity or some such thing. The biggest fish in the tiny pond syndrome I imagine. All in all, not my favorite person, though he's really never given me any legitimate grief. I've certainly never done him wrong. My check is always on time and I do keep a neat apartment. I was the ten-year-old who could play football in the mud and come home spotless.

Jane has taught first grade here since arriving fresh from college some twenty-five years ago - the same year my parents and I moved to Springfield. I was in third grade that year so never actually had her for a teacher. She's never been married. She's always pleasant. The kids and parents love her and I've really never heard an unkind word spoken against her. Of all the residents here, I know her the best. I get books at discounts for her and she keeps me supplied with baked goods from her oven. When I'm away on vacation she comes in and tends my plants and feeds the fish (when I haven't already killed them through neglect or from overfeeding!). I do the same for her. (Feed her fish, not kill them!) Once a year her class comes on a fieldtrip to the bookshop. There's something about kids that age that spook me, but for a few hours a year I can manage to smile and pat heads. She has a nephew in his early twenties who I think takes advantage of her. He looks the bum and she's too easy to hit up for a few bucks. That's my take. Jane seldom speaks about him. Billy, I believe she calls him.

Lance West - I've always thought that would be a great name for a private eye in a mystery series - moved in about a year ago. He's a mechanic at his uncle's garage - about my age, I'd guess. Lots of women in and out of his place - generally in at night and out the next morning. I assume he and Cat have certain charms in common. He has guy friends over on the weekend. They drink and get loud. It's another reason I'm glad I have my cabin retreat close by. The gossip is that he learned his trade in prison. I haven't had reason to verify that - up until now, I guess. Did eighteen months for battery - seems humorously ironic that an auto mechanic was put away for

battery - well, maybe not. (The 'transmission' of illegal substances might have been funnier!) I seldom speak with him though he doesn't appear to be unfriendly. Our paths just don't cross.

Terry Hoffman is the assistant manager of a grocery store. He's been here going on four years. Single with a small group of male friends. Their gatherings are quite the opposite from Lance and his buddies - quiet, Chinese food deliveries rather than pizza, classical music, but never inappropriately loud. He's always pleasant but doesn't seem to want to get close. He drives a BMW which seems odd but then I don't see him spending money on anything else.

Pricilla Dooley lives directly below me. Recently retired from City employment, she lives on social security and a small pension from her deceased husband. (That would be quite a trick, wouldn't it? Actually, it's from a pension he earned while he was living!) It seems she has taken complaining as her mission in life - mostly about teenagers and criminals - they occupy the same category as far as she is concerned. For more than thirty-five years it was her sour countenance our townspeople had to face every time they paid their water bill at city hall. I believe she still thinks of me as the teenager who painted the peace symbol on the water tower - her water tower - twenty years ago. (And, I'd never have been caught if I just hadn't signed it! But how else could I have become a legend in my own ... oh well.)

Re-reading this, it would appear that I'm even more of a snoop than Gus. I don't believe I am. I'm not sure what my foray into the lives of these people tells me. Gus has a power complex and always needs money. Lance is an ex-con with a great name and rowdy buddies. Terry spends too much money and may prefer other men to the fairer sex. Ever-angry Pricilla still hates me for my adolescent prank. That might be a connection to the "naughty boy" comment at the end of the last note. And that chains to the occasion when I was in third grade and Jane (Miss Mason, then, of course) caught me out behind the gym comparing private anatomical parts with Beth Brown. I wonder what ever happened to Beth - she was certainly eager to please. Moved in fourth grade I believe.

I suppose all of that was data gathering. (The reflection upon my immediate neighbors, not the incident with Beth - well, on second thought . . .!) At any rate it certainly wasn't problem solving. The manuscript! Did I work on it during my blacked out, period. Let's see . . . the last thing I remember writing was at the point where Jack and Virginia had found refuge from the driving blizzard in the abandoned old cabin on the side of the mountain. They had all but given up on finding their small son who had wandered off from the camp site the day before. Despair was giving way to depression.

. . . It appears quite a bit has been written since then - from page 206 to page 288 - eighty-two pages. That's more than my usual production in a month - provided the writing is any good. Let me read it and see.

. . . Back. Well, it's some of the best writing I've ever done. Liked to have scared me out of my skin, in fact. One really odd thing, however. I began calling the characters John and Bea - those were my parents' names. That's cause for another chill up the old spine! It was like I was reading that passage for the first time. I must have written in a frenzy of activity to have completed that much. That could account for the name confusion. Then, again . . .

Why can't I remember that week? While I was reading just now it seemed that several times I was approaching a memory and then it would fade. As if it were trying to form there in front of me - like in an animated warping/distorting scene in a movie used to transition to a flashback. The difference was it never came into focus. It just faded before anything specific arrived. It's so hard to know what's real and what's fantasy at this point. It's all so confusing. Good old confusion rears its precious head. It means I still have a choice.

Speaking of head. Mine seems to be sorer now than even earlier in the day. I still don't understand how I could have survived that accident with only a bump on the head - and on the back of my head, in fact. That IS strange. I need to get back out to that hillside and search it for something - who knows what. I just know that I don't have the useful, the important, pieces of data yet.

I'm sure I found the spot where the car left the road. I'm

sure the car in the valley is mine. I'm sure the gas tank is empty - though it could have split upon impact and drained. But if that's true why didn't it catch fire? The car appeared to have slid forward across the rocky ground for some ten to fifteen feet before coming to a stop. Rocks against metal - there were bound to have been sparks.

I wonder if someone else could have been riding with me and it was he or she who was killed. I would have had just about enough time to take that body some distance away and hide it - bury it, maybe? - before Chance arrived. But the backpack in the driver's seat? The rider would have had to have been in the back seat, unless the backpack was strapped into place after the accident. So many possibilities. Too many questions.

No. Never too many questions. There's a wise old detective in a mystery series - what's his name? Raymond Masters. He always says that 90% of solving a case depends upon asking the right question. I need to keep asking questions until I find that right one.

So, where does all this stand right now? I have received two notes from someone claiming to have videotaped me killing somebody. The first note appeared to be leaning toward blackmail. The second toward vengeance. Why the shift? Just money? My entire vacation week has been wiped from my memory - possibly due to the bump my head took in the accident - if that's where it actually happened. I did write - and write well - up at the cabin that week - well, I assume it was at the cabin. How I wish Cat could talk. My car sits in shambles in a valley below a hill in the vicinity of my cabin. It should have burned but didn't. This strange backpack was secured onto the front seat. It contained children's - what can I call it - keepsakes, I suppose, since they all appear to be of the vintage from my own childhood. Then, Chance found me and brought me home - both he and Jane verify that. The hill where the accident occurred was a place where my parents and I camped on several occasions when I was young.

What else. Oh, yes. Cindy mentioned I had been feeling 'blue' just before leaving on my vacation. 'Blue' could mean so many things. (Smurf-like, perhaps!) My how I wish I had not

given up writing in my diary every evening. Haven't done that for fifteen years, I suppose. I have a good feeling about this Journal. I think it's going to help - provided he doesn't decide to kill me before I get it all figured out. That's a chilling thought. I should get a gun for protection. I have a .22 rifle in the back of my closet. I will get that out now but I also need a hand gun. I can't carry a rifle around during the day. I'll take care of that in the morning. The pawn shop should have what I need. I'll tell the owner I have rats up at my cabin and need it to shoot them. No. That detective said the guilty party often implicates himself by offering way too much self-protective information. I'll give no reason.

Goodness, I hope I can sleep.

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### **Chapter Three: *Another Day, Another Note***

I took a generic, over the counter, sleep aid last night. It helped me sleep but I'm not sure if that really did me a favor. My dreams still left me feeling wrung out and trampled. I felt close to some images as my mind roused this morning. I'm certain they had been there but faded before I could take them into conscious custody. Darkness. More than that. A swirling, form-filled, discomfoting, darkness. Forms! Yes! But far too nebulous to recognize. Circles. More like half-circles. Eyes perhaps. I don't know.

During my break at work this morning I called the County Sheriff's office for information on that other accident Chance mentioned - the one twenty-five or so years ago. The accident records from back then are all on paper and stored in the basement of the courthouse. As they have time, they will search it out for me. I said I was a writer researching a story connected with the old camp grounds - not entirely untrue. The secretary seemed quite accommodating, but she'll have to work it into her schedule. I'm to call back at the end of the week. It's probably one of those "no connection in a million" things, but I have to be doing something.

I stopped by the pawn shop on the way to work. He put a little Berretta - not even sure if that's how it's spelled - away for me. I didn't realize it involved a background check. He'll call when I can pick it up. That can't be too soon for me! It's small. Easily concealed. Concealing it is probably illegal even if it's registered. Can't say I care at this point. I am coming to understand how desperate people find it so easy to break the law.

The heart stopper occurred mid-morning. I unlocked the desk drawer to get a few dollars out of petty cash so Cindy could run to the store for coffee creamer. On top of the green bank bag was a third, big, brown, envelope. My suddenly weakened knees dropped me into the chair. I've heard of getting weak in the knees but thought it was just a saying - it is for real - as if you instantly faint from the waist down.

Like the others, it had been both lick sealed and taped. I cut it open, my hands trembling. My mouth went dry. Cindy interrupted for the cash and I managed that okay. I have the idea she knows something's wrong but she hasn't said anything. I'm not certain which was the more frightening - the note itself or the fact that it had appeared inside my LOCKED desk drawer. I have the only key that I know of; well, no, J. A. - the store owner - may have one. He comes in only occasionally. I run the store. He makes the profit. I'll have to think more about any possible motive J. A. might have connected to this. I had not considered him as a suspect 'til just now.

But, back to the note itself.

*Mary had some fresh LAMB jam,  
Fresh Lamb Jam,  
Fresh LaMB jAM,  
Mary had some fresh LaMb jam,  
It stuck BETween her toes!!!*

*. . . I may give YOU 2 more WEEKS - maybe not.  
SLEEP WELL - Eternally yours, Johnny.*

The poem - a kid's song really - rushed a long-hidden memory into focus. When I was small, my Father used to sing me his own rendition of *Mary had a Little Lamb*. I remember giggling myself, feet-kicking-in-the-air silly, every time he'd begin. It always ended with tickles and hugs. Mother enjoyed it too but never openly admitted it. But how - who - would know about that private family tidbit and why include it in a threatening note? To tell me he's not an outsider, perhaps.

The second part was unadulterated terrorism, designed to keep me in limbo - give me a deadline then fudge on it.

Someone was clearly as interested in having me squirm - keeping me looking over my shoulder, punishing me in the here and now - as in killing me. He had succeeded. I was terrified. It was like a cat torturing a mouse before the feast. Not until the mouse lost its ability to be a creditable adversary would his time finally run out. Unlike the mindless cat, however, this guy knows he's administering excruciating torture. Publicly, I must impart the image of one with lots of fight left in me. I must walk tall and with purpose. I must not glance over my shoulder. I can't know when he may be watching. I wonder if he even is watching? Is torture better than death? For the time being it seems to be. Enduring it is buying me time. It is my currency in all this.

It was signed - Johnny. Big help! The most popular first name in the history of the English language. Johnny. Johnny. There does seem to be something there. What? What! My Father's name was John. He's long gone - died years ago, in an accident while he was in the service. It could be just a distracter of course - a common name thrown in to confuse me - to throw me off the track. My aunt, my mother's sister, is Johnnie Sue. She must be almost seventy and lives in Canada. I doubt if she's bustling about down here in the shadows trying to make my life hell on earth. I must leave no possibility unexplored, however. She might have known about the song - perhaps the only family member left who might, in fact. She could have been privy to a 'Naughty boy' something-or-other. But the papers used were from here. It would mean she would have to be here.

No. It wouldn't. She had two children - my cousins who I've probably seen no more than a half dozen times in my life. A boy and a girl - Carter and Katy. They would be about ten and twelve years older than I am, I suppose. Mother was younger than her sister by a good many years. Aunt Johnnie was not a very nice person as I recall. That's probably why I haven't kept in contact with her. I remember she once said my mother was an unfortunate, unplanned, accident that ruined my grandparent's life. Other than its hurtful intent, I didn't understand the first thing about that as a child. I do now, of course. It was a coldhearted and mean - fully uncalled for -

comment which may have, however, characterized the two sister's relationship. Mother virtually never spoke of her. Still, it seems a far reach to think either Aunt Johnnie or my cousins would have reason to be after me - unless the sins of the parent (merely being born) are truly being visited upon the child.

I keep coming back to the opportunist - the person who just happened upon me when whatever happened, happened. But how would he gain access to my locked drawer? How would he know about Father's song? Why would he have the need to punish me - to destroy me? Someone with an Angel of God complex, perhaps?

That may be supported by the phrase before the signature - Eternally yours. Eternally has an ominous finality to it. That may be all that was intended.

It has been a very slow day here at the store. I sent Cindy home at two. It's nearly five now. Clearly, I've had lots of time to write. Probably should have reworked the shelves but there will be tomorrow for that - I hope. There is no sigh big enough to quiet the tension I carry. Yesterday it came and went. Today, it has taken up permanent residence inside me somewhere between my neck and navel. There is no one here so I'm going to close, then head back out to the cabin and the campground.

. . . Back. It's after ten o'clock this evening. I stopped at the "Always Open" convenience store (humorously its hours are listed as being from six a.m. to midnight!!!) to put in a supply of food. It seems I'm spending more time than usual out here. In addition to the staples, I picked up two tuna fish sandwiches from the deli case for supper - one and a half for me and a half for Cat. I assume he was appreciative. He didn't say, though did look up at me several times during the gorging. He passed on the chips. Stale and greasy. I ate them, anyway. I suppose that says something about our relative intelligence.

He's still purring his heart out in my lap as I begin writing. He nuzzles my belt buckle occasionally when my stroking ceases for too long. Cat has most aspects of his life figured out. When you're hungry there are certain places you go so the folks there can have the privilege of feeding you. You eat, and then you allow some lucky guy to pet you. When the petting stops,

you put your nose to the buckle, which automatically reinstates the process. He's here for my benefit - at his pleasure. When he has graced me with his presence just long enough, he lopes, lazily, to the floor and walks majestically toward the door, which always opens as he comes near. Cat understands his universe. He has no doubt that he is fully in control of it - and me.

So, remind me again: why is being a man so much better than being a cat?

I digress. I'm placing digression just to the inside right of limbo, on Peter's Limbo to Depression Scale. I am coming to appreciate digression's value as a sanity protractor.

I found several interesting things as I explored the cliff road this evening. There is a spot some thirty yards up the hill from where my car left the road, where all the vegetation died recently. It is roughly three feet in diameter and still smells of gasoline. I say 'still' because my theory now is that as the car sat over that spot, a hole was put in the gas tank and the gas drained into the ground. Facing downhill as the car was, there would still have been some gas forward in the fuel line - enough, I imagine, to power the car to a good speed toward the jump off point.

I have no possible answers as to why. Well, yes, the obvious one, I suppose. Someone didn't want the car to explode into flames upon impact. Still, why? Who? Could it have been the person I killed? That could make sense. Let's say that someone accosted me up there (why I would have been there, and accosted for what reason I have no clue - robbery maybe) and drained the tank. I overpowered him, perhaps, and in the process killed him. Maybe I shoved him over the cliff. Maybe he was in the car and went over the cliff in it. I went down the side of the hill, removed the body and buried it. But still, why would he have drained the tank? Perhaps he didn't. Perhaps that part happened by accident. There are lots of sharp rocks on that road. One could have been propelled against the tank by a tire. The bad guy could have taken off in the car - leaving me behind - and the power steering could have failed as it ran out of gas and the engine shut down. He had been attempting to steal my car. Does that make sense? Parts of it, maybe. Too much left to coincidence.

(Opportunistic robbery is always a coincidence, however!) Why would I have felt the need to dispose of his body? Why not just call the sheriff and report what had happened? Maybe because I actually had some nefarious relationship with the person, which needed to remain hidden.

Hypothesis after hypothesis. What do I actually know for sure? Well, up on the road I did find a spot where gas had drained from some source into the ground - and recently. There were relatively fresh marks - indentations - on the road that could have been made by spinning automobile tires.

I made my way down the very steep hillside to the car. It was thick with pine trees and the ground was covered in a blanket of brown needles laid to rest there over a period of many seasons. As I descended the slope I saw signs that someone or some large animal, perhaps, had recently made that same trip. The needles had been disturbed. There were slide marks; I suppose that's what you would call them. About half way down I began letting those marks be my guide. They lead directly to the car. The steering mechanism had been badly damaged upon impact and during the last ten feet of sliding across the rocks, so I couldn't tell if it had been damaged or tampered with prior to the crash. The same held true for the gas tank. Until the car is raised or tipped I won't be able to look for the man-made hole I expect to find.

I saw no traces of blood inside the car. I spent a good deal of time looking. The key was still in the ignition and it was in the 'on' position. The driver's seatbelt was intact - undone but fully functional. My vehicle papers were in the glove compartment and I retrieved them along with assorted scraps including a roadmap and credit card receipts for gas and food. The trunk was sprung but had not opened wide enough so anyone could tell. It contained nothing but what I remembered having been there. All in all, for all that work, I learned nothing that was really helpful. Well, maybe. The trail of skid marks down the hillside.

The climb back to the top was arduous and time consuming. I'm now filthy. My shoes are scuffed and I tore my jeans. My hands got cut on the rocks. Very un-Pete-like!

. . . Cat just left to woo the ladies. Seems like a long time

since I've wooed anything. I was even eying the laptop, myself, a few minutes ago. (smile) Not safe to involve a lady in my life just now. One more thing to feel desperate about.

I need to shower. The water will be cold. I'm chicken. I brought my rifle. I've kept it in the car all day. Not sure if that's legal. Probably not if it's loaded. It is. Well, it's here beside me now. I'm sure that's legal. For some reason, I feel safer out here than back in town. Strange. I'm all alone here. I'd think just that would make the place scary. I must be brave, now.

. . . I just spent five minutes being brave - in the shower. Not as cold as I had predicted. My little water tower held the day's heat pretty well. I hear the pump pumping replacement water as I write. I'm not sure why I don't just move out here. It takes ten minutes to get to work from my apartment - whether I walk or drive. It would only take thirty to drive from here. A fairly insignificant difference in the scheme of things.

Those two new references in the last note - 'Johnny' and 'eternally' - are really bugging me. I just can't get a handle on either one and they do seem important. I've also been thinking about J. A. and any reasons he might have to be after me. There was that robbery at the bookstore two years ago. Not a whole lot was taken - several hundred dollars and a few dozen books. Well, there was also the brand new, five pound, can of coffee! That put more of a crimp into my life than the rest. I've begun to wonder if J. A. suspects me of that and could be using all of this . . . of course there is no 'all of this' as far as he's concerned.

What if the accident, my lost week, and the threatening notes are all just coincidences - none of them actually related in any way to any of the others. It could be. Probably unlikely, but it could be. Where would that leave me? How would that help?

Okay, let's say the lost week is a result of a blow on the head that I received in the accident. That combination seems reasonable. That leaves the threatening note aspect all quite separate. It's just the coincidence of the blow to the head that won't allow me to remember who I killed, why, when or where.

That memory is supposed to return. It hasn't begun yet. I wonder if there is a pill to speed up the process. Maybe I

should go see a doctor. No good reason not to. I don't have to even mention the car accident. I could say the garage door went out of control and came down on my head. That will work. I can mention the blank period in my memory and just let him take it from there. Okay. I'll make an appointment in the morning. That's a positive step I can take.

I also need to find out who lives in the three, two-story houses down the block from me on Maple - the ones that might have a direct view into my apartment from their second-floor windows. One of them has a couple of teenage boys, I'm sure of that. Could this be as simple as a prank they might be pulling on me? My, that would be nice. Probably not, considering the reference to the song. An older couple lives in the one furthest away. Without a telescope, I doubt they could see anything from that distance. Maybe they have a boarder in one of the upstairs rooms. I don't recall anything at all about the third place. I'll walk the street tomorrow evening and see who's out. Talk a bit and listen a lot.

Maybe that's a bad idea. I won't have my hand gun by then and sure can't stroll down the street looking like Doc Holliday. (Well, at least I understand that reference even if the name may be misspelled!)

. . . There was a sound on the roof near the chimney. It scared the hell out of me (a good thing I suppose, assuming I don't want 'the hell' to be in me in the first place!) That's interesting. Humor may well be a form of digression and deserves a spot on my new Limbo-Depression Scale. It stopped. (The noise not the Scale!) I'm going to assume it was a squirrel. Didn't seem heavy enough for a person. I locked the door and windows - also closed the inside shutters on the windows. At this moment, I think I'd rather be back in my apartment.

. . . I poked up the fire and added a log. I know with my intellect that a person could NOT climb down my chimney but I turned up the heat just the same. A malevolent Santa? Naughty and nice? That's getting about as close to the border of insanity as I care to get. I wish Cat were here with me. I can just see the two of us - side by side - six-guns at the ready, fending off the bad guy as he emerges from the hearth.

That nudged me another step closer, I suppose. Considering it, now, that whole cat tale gives me paws. (Apologies) Perhaps bad humor should be slipped much closer to the Depression end of the scale - at about the point where desperation begins blunting itself on the drop toward the numbness of full-blown depression. Bad humor equates with desperate digression.

Who could I have killed? I should search my acquaintances to find if anybody is missing. I wonder if I really spent that entire vacation week right here. The receipts from the glove compartment! Let me look through them. That's interesting! I may be insane but I'm not unintelligent!!

. . . Back (probably self-evident!) Interesting and eerie findings among those receipts. One gas receipt is from Evansville a town that is 'sort of' between here and Lancaster, the place where I lived before we moved here. Another receipt, on that same day is, in fact, from Lancaster. The following day there's one from back here. Smack dab in the middle of my vacation week I made a quick trip back to Lancaster by the roundabout Evansville route. Perhaps that's where I got into trouble with the BM. I must return there and retrace my steps. I'll call in sick tomorrow. It's Cindy's day to close anyway. It's been slow this week. It shouldn't be a hardship on her. (See, I am a nice guy. Even in my terror, I'm thinking about Cindy's wellbeing.)

Where will I start? The receipt has the name and address of the gas station in Evansville. I'll begin there. What do I remember about Lancaster? It's quite a bit larger than Springfield. I liked the smaller school when we got here. I remember a huge park I played in as a boy. It had a stream down through the center and a gentle hill along one side. There was a very large sand box and lots of swings and teeters and a big merry-go-round. There were trails on which I rode my little bike and tables and outdoor fireplaces where we'd have picnics.

What else about that town? We attended a big Catholic church. For some reason, we stopped going when we came to Springfield. I loved going to church. The priest was always so pleasant. When he talked to me it was like I was the only person in his whole life. Just him and me. I can't remember his name.

Father somebody (daaaaa!). Perhaps I should look him up.

Then there was the school - Principal Schultz. My how I hated that man. Maybe I went back and did him in. Strange. That thought gave me a very pleasant rush. (Naughty, naughty boy, Peter!) An interesting parenthetical expression that crept in there. No images to go with it though. I'll check on his safety while I'm there. He's probably safely six feet under, come to think of it - he was past retirement age when I was six.

What else? Old Nettie Nolar lived across the street from us. She was the second wife of a man who owned a grocery store (second by death, not bigamy, you understand.). [YOU?] I remember it was the first time I realized a man could go through more than one wife in a lifetime. She was always kind and I loved to stop in and chat with her. She always had goodies and always asked first if my mother knew where I was. Of course, I always said yes, regardless. She seemed to believe me. She'd ask my opinion about things and would always accept it no matter what I said. Nobody else in my life ever asked my opinions back then. Nobody listened to my ideas. It made me feel so important. So worthy or valuable, I suppose is a better take on it. I'm sure she's long gone by now. She was ancient even back then (at least forty!). She was a very positive part of my life. It shouldn't take something like this to bring up her memory. I can't say I remember anything much about him other than the day I learned to ride my bike he called out, "Good goin', Kid," as I rode on by. He didn't know I hadn't yet learned to stop, and after such a fine compliment, I wasn't about to let him see me execute my calculated crash and fall so I whizzed on by. That was really nice. In fact, I remember telling Mother what he said.

I only had a few friends my own age as I recall. For some reason that's fuzzy. Mostly at school friends, I guess. There was some little kid from my neighborhood who used to follow me around. Can't place him beyond that. Oh, yes, he called me Fêtie instead of Petie. I think he also wet the bed. Just full of important info on him. I can just see me now, going up to all the thirty-year-old men in my old neighborhood and asking if they happen to be the little bed wetter who used to pester me and call me Fêtie.

Well, that digression seemed to work. No more noise from the roof and my general anxiety has decreased back to the level of merely terrified. There may be a book come from this: The Limbo-Depression Continuum, subtitled, The Ying and Yang of Desperation. What was it that I asked in my first entry? *“Is the madman ever aware of that moment when his notion of reality inches through the rift of no return?”*

Sleep. I wore myself out as I climbed about on that hillside this evening. Perhaps I can sleep more easily tonight. I guess I’ll go ahead and take the “Sleep Soon” pill anyway. I’ll check the doors and windows again and then see if the arms of Morpheus will have me.

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## **Chapter Four: *A Family Affair?***

“St. Agnes. Father O’Malley,” I was saying aloud and crisply as I awoke this morning. Some part of my mind had been hard at work for me as I slept - hard at work in a productive way, I mean. That was the Priest and the name of the church back in Lancaster. I figure I can make a call or two and see where that leads before committing a whole day to a trip.

I slept later than usual and can’t decide whether I had indeed slept more restfully or if I am just getting used to the exhaustion that continues with me from day to day.

Cat was at the door, clearly at a loss as to why it hadn’t been open when he arrived. It was a bacon and egg breakfast - one of his favorites so his initial snit soon passed. Glimmering coals remained in the fire place waiting and hoping, it seemed to me, to be fanned to life under some new log eager to give up its light and heat for my benefit. That seemed an interesting contrast to Cat. I welcomed them both into my life and yet their styles - personalities, if you will - were so very different. Altruistic coals. Egocentric Cat. The coals took care of me. Cat provided me something to take care of. Balance. Perhaps that’s what had struck me. I loved the coals. I loved the cat but for such very different reasons. Digression or balance? An interesting question to pursue later.

Again, I found myself hurrying just to make it directly to the store on time. A message on my voice mail informed me Cindy would be late. Son number two had been sick all night and she had to arrange a sitter. I called her to suggest she take the day off but she had already left the house. I continued to be amazed at how she so adroitly juggled family and work. I’m

not put together so I could do that. I admire her for it. I don't understand it, but I do admire her skills.

There are times I wish I had what she has - a loving mate, three children, and the significant opportunity to help them grow into fine, well adjusted, contributing members of society. At that point it rapidly becomes overwhelming and I willingly retreat to my comfortable, bachelor life in which my biggest responsibility is often making sure my cactus gets its monthly watering. There have been women I have cared about. There is a woman I now care about. It's the responsibility thing I suppose. Or maybe the kids. I get just so far in a relationship and I become frightened out of my skull.

I called the church in Lancaster, soon wishing I hadn't. I spoke with Father Lester. He had been on sabbatical or some such thing the last two years we had lived there. The good news was that he confirmed Father O'Malley and I had spent time together the previous Wednesday - early afternoon. The bad news was that he had not been heard from since three p.m. that day. I appeared to be off the hook. He had been seen at the church after I left.

Just the same, could he have been the one I harmed? How could that have come about? Perhaps I had done confession with him. Perhaps I had sought him out because I had already killed someone and needed to set things right - but away from Springfield. Perhaps, in this paranoia I'm feeling, I didn't believe he could be trusted with my secret and, later, I went back and killed him. That, of course, would total two killings. My mind is cloning improbabilities and making them appear likely.

Father Lester spoke as though he knew my family well. Apparently, he had married my parents (that's an interestingly strange phrase.). He said he just celebrated his eightieth birthday. I assume time has taken its toll on his memory. There were several things about my family he had misremembered. At eighty he deserves some leeway in the memory department. I gave him my number and asked to be kept informed about O'Malley's disappearance. He said he would. I hope he remembers. I'll call later in the week if I don't hear from him. Maybe I should just go back there.

I also made a doctor's appointment. A cancellation allowed me to get in at one o'clock this very afternoon. Cindy was there and functioning at her usual levels of enthusiasm and efficiency by then. When she heard why I needed to leave she seemed relieved - as if a visit to a brain doctor seemed in order for some reason. That disturbed me. I'm not sure why. I probably took it as a putdown and I have real difficulty with putdowns. Why a putdown? Needing to go to see a doctor means I'm less than perfect, I suppose. Perhaps I need to be spending my time with a psychiatrist rather than a neurologist. Something to seriously consider, I suppose.

The neurologist felt my head and asked me if it was sore to the touch (the area I had just told him hurt when I touched it!). He had his assistant scan my brain with a very expensive looking piece of equipment that warranted its very own, small, stark, white, overly sterile-appearing room. Just why the pretty young nurse insisted I strip naked and don a paper gown three sizes too small in order to have my head examined I'll never understand. (Perhaps she often finds her patient's brains truly are elsewhere on their anatomy!) Never having been modest it wasn't a problem - just time consuming and I assumed I was being charged by the second.

Later, fully dressed again, I met the doctor in his office - ostentatiously larger than my entire apartment - for his learned pronouncement.

"Your brain is fine."

"No concussion?" I asked.

"No concussion," he said.

"Then why has my memory been wiped clean?"

"Don't know. Not my field, you understand."

Let's see, all told I received a mere baker's dozen words, a charismatic smile, and a firm handshake. The bill was six hundred dollars - nearly fifty dollars a word. Why didn't I listen when Mother said I should go into medicine? (Of course, the unabashed ogling of my nakedness by the nurse had been worth more than a few of those bucks! - That would have made it 'buck naked' I assume!!))

Actually, it had probably been worth it right down the line. If my memory loss was not caused by damage to my brain, then

it was indeed from damage to my mind. Why would I rather have heard it was the other way around? (Rhetorical! Poorly constructed, but nonetheless, strictly rhetorical.)

I have no doubt that if I have indeed done something as reprehensible as killing somebody, my mind might try to get rid of the memory. I've always been 'Peaceful Pete'. I've never lifted a hand in anger. To do so would be contrary to everything I believe I am. I can certainly see the old mind turning flip flops over something like that. Understanding the possibility, however, gets me no closer to a solution.

None of my attempts today to clarify things have succeeded. The answers I received have driven me far closer to depression than I dare get.

Cindy was pleased to hear the positive medical report. It could not have answered whatever basic question she was harboring about my wellbeing, but she was clearly happy at the news. I agreed and tried to meet pleased with pleased, happy with happy. I'm not sure if I pulled it off. I'm quite sure it fell short at perky for perky. I retreated to the office to avoid facing any feedback.

I had left my briefcase there while I was away. My head began to ache and my supply of buffered aspirin was inside it. I placed it on the desk, unlocked it, and opened the top. Terror struck again. A big brown envelope stared up at me. 'Either this is going to have to stop or I need to begin buying stock in the Big Brown Envelope Company,' I thought. Through it all I managed to chuckle at that. Chortle means chuckling through your words. I need a word that means chuckling through your terror. Cherrortle! That should work.

I cut it open and removed the sheet.

*"To prolong your life by one week - well, maybe one day - Pay THOMAS Gray, by SUNdown today, the sum of two thousand dollars as restitution for stealing his girlfriend in 10th grade, Johnny"*

Thomas Gray. Yes. I know him. Tommy. He cooks at Rick's Café. I often eat there. I guess I did sort of steal his girlfriend that year. Peggy Wilson. We went to the Winter Carnival Dance together. He did threaten me over it days later.

They never got back together. She and I dated on and off the rest of the year. She left for college and I haven't seen or heard of her since. Does this mean that it's Tommy who is doing this to me? I really doubt if he's smart enough to have put it all together. In grade school, we were pretty good friends, actually. He was over at the house a lot during third grade. I was the new kid and he seemed to need a friend. He might have known about my Father's song. But why would he sign the notes Johnny?

A big decision here. Do I pay or not? If I pay, how? Cash I assume. I have it. What to do? What to do?

I took the aspirin (that's plural - as in three!) and closed the case locking the envelope safely inside. It was then I noticed *Popo*, the toy clown I've had since grade school. One glance at his silly grin and the worst of days brightened. I have always kept him on my desk. There he lay. His legs and arms broken off and his grin over drawn into a frown. I shed an all quite uncontrollable and unexpected tear. BM was clearly serious. I would pay. I excused myself and left for the bank.

I went to my usual teller and handed her a check for two thousand made out for cash. She smiled as usual and checked her computer screen.

"You don't seem to have enough in your checking account to cover this. Probably that other check for cash last week. Shall I transfer from savings?"

"What is my total?"

She turned her flat screen so I could see it. I had indeed taken out two thousand dollars the Monday before my vacation. My balance was under eight hundred.

"Yes. I guess I'd forgotten about that one. Once you turn 29 you know." I tried to cover up my ignorance of the transaction.

"How much?"

"The full two thousand - no make it twenty-five hundred."

She made out a form and had me sign it. I soon had twenty-five, crisp, new, hundred-dollar bills in my hand. I put them into my wallet and walked to my car. There I transferred twenty of them into a waiting envelope and sealed it.

Assuming I was being watched I did it all in an open

fashion so there would be no doubt what was going on. I drove to Rick's parking lot. I found Tommy's car and left the envelope on the front seat. My heart pumped hard as I completed the delivery. It was just the money - no explanation. I couldn't bring myself to add the explanation - put down, failure, naughty boy, guilt - for whatever reason. Wow! Guilt! Why did that hit me like a Mac truck? (Pardon the overused cliché!)

As I sit here now, back at my desk, I'm sopping wet with sweat. I wonder if most people's earlobes sweat. I've just discovered that mine do. Over the past twenty minutes I've come to smell like a linebacker after Sunday's big game. It's nearly five. I'll send Cindy on her way and pray my Mitchum puts up the valiant fight until the customers clear out. Lots of people in and out today. Lots of sales. Lots of folks to be suspicious of. My mind keeps coming back to the two thousand dollars missing from my account - money that I clearly took, if the teller is to be believed. Could she be in on this thing in some way? Paranoia. Plain and simple paranoia. Back off! Let it lay (or is that let it lie? 'Leave it alone', how's that?).

I'll stop by the pawn shop and pick up my gun. Apparently, I have been found to be an upstanding citizen worthy of carrying the means to kill off other citizens - upstanding and otherwise, I have to assume.

. . . It's nine thirty. Dark outside. I walked the neighborhood until the street lights came on. I hadn't done that in long time. I knew the area well as a boy, even though we lived across town. My J.C. Higgins (a Sears bike) and I knew every nook and cranny of Springfield back then.

The older couple likes to chat - John and Mary Jones. Just how run of the mill, upper mid-west, can two names be? There's that John again! They seemed happy to see me even though they didn't recognize me. They remembered the bright red J. C. Higgins from twenty plus years ago, however.

"What a beautiful old house you have here," I began.

"Thank you," Mary said.

"Been here forty three years," John added. "Raised four boys. It's a wonder the place survived!"

They laughed and I joined them.

"Probably seems empty then," I said, sneaking up on my

real question. "Ever take in boarders?"

John turned to Mary. "We've thought about it but never have. You looking to move?"

"No. Just wondered."

"Second floor's been vacant since our baby moved out years ago," she explained.

It was as if they anticipated my needs and offered the information without my asking.

There was no hint of nervousness on their part. They were still clearly in love at seventy-five. Early on in that conversation I figured I could probably cross them off my list. By the end, I was fully convinced.

"We enjoy our privacy now that John's retired," Mary went on.

"Retired from . . . ?" I asked.

"I was the Methodist minister at the church down there at Oak and Rutherford. Spent thirty years there. We came up from Nashville. Loved it here. Had the good fortune to have parishioners who liked us as well, I guess. It's been a good life in Springfield."

I left them holding hands on the front walk. They had something I probably would never have. I wanted it. I yearned for it, in fact, but there was something about the prospect of marriage that sent chills up my spine. I always seem to chicken out when the woman begins discussing children. Don't know what that is but I'm just sure I'd make a terrible parent.

I moved on to the next two-story. A pair of teenage boys were washing a car in the driveway - well the car and each other. I guessed them to be fifteen and sixteen.

"Evening, Mr. Alexander," the older one said. I was surprised that he knew my name.

"Looks like you two are hard at it," I said, never knowing what to say to young people.

"Snuck out to a party last night. Busted sneaking back in. Car washing duty for the next two months," the younger one said, offering it up as if I were somehow entitled to know. "I'm Adam and the big, dumb one there is Bruce."

Bruce stuck the hose down the front of Adam's pants. It was soon extricated and the conversation continued as if

nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“You guys grow up here in this place?” I asked, indicating the house.

“Yup,” Adam answered. “It’s a good spot. Close to school and the Mall.”

“And to Mary Lou,” Bruce added, repeatedly raising his eyebrows above a broad grin.

They hit each other several times and laughed. It’s a strange custom of the adolescent male. When embarrassed, hit somebody.

“I guess we should explain,” Bruce said. “My brother’s into astronomy - he’s the geek and I’m the jock.”

Again, there was a brief time-out for a mutual pounding. Apparently, another custom required of the current teen species after a put-down.

“Anyway,” Adam continued, “A few years ago we discovered that when the telescope was aimed at the sky you could only look at a cold, white, distant star, but when aimed down into Mary Lou’s bedroom, you could see a beautiful, warm, well-tanned, naked girl.”

I was at a loss for a response. Had I been fifteen years younger I’d have probably banged their heads together. (The reaction patterns of the teen male don’t seem to progress much from generation to generation.) Adam saved me - well, at least he prevented me from stumbling over an awkward barrage of gibberish.

“We talked about it and decided that it’s okay because she knows we look. She leaves her drapes open and like gazes up at us sometimes. Lately she’s been opening her window. We wonder if she’s inviting us to come and visit. Bruce’s chicken to go over and check it out.”

It called for another pummeling. I just assume they have both sported permanently bruised bodies for years. It seemed strange they would share their intimate secret with me. I doubt if it’s discussed over their dinner table. I was interested in how they knew my name.

“I apologize for not knowing your names when you clearly know mine.”

It was the older one’s turn.

“At the bookshop. I buy books sometimes.”

Adam had to comment.

“The rest of the time he’s in there lusting over Cindy.”

For some reason that required only a big smile - no fists had to fly. I guess it’s just been too long. I forget the rules of uncivilized conduct between boys.

“She’s married with three children, you know,” I added for lack of anything useful to say.

Now that did require more beating - directed toward each other, not me. Somehow, I predicted it. Perhaps at some subconscious level I’m not so far removed from those years after all.

In general, they seemed like nice, normal, kids. Polite even. And they were teenagers! Now, I’m sounding like Pricilla. I guess every generation has its Mary Lou. The guys in mine had Betty Ann - I mean we really HAD Betty Ann.

The boys’ parents surfaced for a few minutes as they arrived home from a PTO meeting. Few high schools seem to struggle with that concept anymore. Too bad. They also seemed like nice people. Despite the incident which led to the car-washing punishment that was underway, it was clear they were happy to see each other. The father owns a camera shop and she’s mostly just a stay at home mom - a rare breed these days.

“Take out from Rick’s in the backseat,” the father said, and the boys fell over each other getting to it.

“Rick’s. Great food, I said,” trying to fill what to me was another awkward moment.

“The boy’s like their ribs,” she said. “When Tommy knows it’s for Bruce and Adam he puts together quite a feed.”

“You know old Tommy, then? A boyhood friend of mine,” I said, taken aback at the mention of his name.

“Tommy’s my nephew,” she said. “Bless his heart; he had encephalitis as a baby you know. Made him a little short in the intelligence department. He’s doing well at Rick’s though. They like him there. He’s a good kid and a good worker.”

The boys returned bearing numerous Styrofoam boxes. I said good evening and walked on as they moved toward the house. The telescope gave me some concern - especially after

learning of the family's relationship with Tommy. Has one or both been peeking into my window as well? No frolicking young naked nymphs there, I'm sad to say. All in all I thought the boys seemed like pretty straight arrows. The conversation didn't eliminate them from my list but certainly moved them toward the bottom.

The third two-story belongs to a young family - two girls and a boy all under ten. The father is a policeman and the mother a paramedic. They've lived in Springfield for the past seven years. Her widower father lives in two upstairs rooms that face my building. I didn't meet him but saw him looking down from one of the windows. When I smiled up at him, he disappeared behind the drapes. The middle child, a girl, explained.

"That's Grampa Grumps. He don't like strangers."

Her mother shushed her, feeling the need to explain.

"Sometimes Dad can be out of sorts. The children kid around about him being Grampa Grumps."

I smiled as if I fully understood about kids. Of course, I don't but it seemed to have been accepted at face value (so to speak). It is the closest of the three houses and with a pair of binoculars there probably wouldn't be anything very private about my living room or bedroom when the drapes are open.

"Sounds like you have a busy life," I said, making small talk in the hope of learning a bit more.

"I guess we like it that way," the man said, looking down into his wife's face. She nodded.

"I play the piano, the oldest girl announced," opting not to be ignored.

"I'll bet your Grampa enjoys having you play for him," I said in return, fully surprised and pleased at my suddenly-found conversational skill.

"Sometimes. Sometimes he yells and says to stop."

The mother looked embarrassed. I felt embarrassed. The cop shrugged his broad shoulders as if to say, 'Kids will be kids. What the heck?' I liked his reaction. It was comfortable. He explained further.

"It's as hard on him as it is on us - suddenly without his wife of forty years and legs that don't work well anymore after

the accident. It's quite an adjustment for all of us, but we're family. We'll make it."

I had the feeling they would. The street light came on above us. I made my exit and I walked on home, interestingly less hurried - momentarily more relaxed, even - than when I had begun my mission that evening.

The more I think about somebody viewing something that took place in my apartment the more marginally possible it seems. Jane indicates that I was gone the full week. I suppose I could have come back briefly during one of the days while she was at school. But then the boys would have also been in school. Still, that connection to Tommy was hard to ignore. There are coincidences of course but that one seemed a stretch. Maybe one of the boys was sick the day I returned and had witnessed whatever I had done. I shivered - as much from confusion as fright, I think.

If the boys were ruled out - as would seem to follow from the general feeling I got about them - that would appear to leave only Grampa Grumps around here during that day to have seen me. Well, him and Gus, I suppose.

The air felt chilly as I walked up the outside stairway to my apartment. I stopped and looked back down into the neighborhood. The girls were jumping rope under the street light and their little brother was trying to run them down with his tricycle. The minister and his wife were sitting in the swing on their porch. I detected the glint from what I fantasized was a telescope lens moving back and forth from a second-floor window at the house of what I assumed by then would have been a heavily breathing Bruce and Adam. I noticed a well-lit, undraped, first floor window across the street from them. I suddenly yearned for some company of my own. (Where's Cat when I need him!)

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## Chapter Five: *Steps Retraced*

I made the decision to take the day off and try to retrace my steps from my recent trip to Lancaster. Last night, after I returned from my evening walk around the area, I called Cindy and feigned illness. It's 5:10 a.m. now and I'll be on the road in five minutes. I have no idea what I'll discover but I hope something helpful turns up. I'll use my concern about Father O'Malley to explain my presence to Father Lester - provided O'Malley is not back safe and sound. I've arranged my credit card receipts in order according to the time of day stamped on each one. I'll take the extra time to go down through Evansville. I have one receipt - the first one - from a gas station there.

One thing I just don't get. It appears that I paid for things using my credit card so why would I have taken all that cash out of my bank account?

. . . Okay, so I won't be on the road in five minutes. As I was leaving my apartment and turned to make sure the door locked, I discovered another big brown envelope taped there. I brought it back inside and opened it. Strangely it was cut from a newspaper which used Bookman fonts - not our local one. Bookman is fairly old fashioned for today's papers. It contains another request for a money payment to cover a wrong done many years ago.

*"Fiddle Dee dEE. You **MUST** put **\$100** in the poor **BOX** at St AGnes to repay **ONE** hundred **FOLD** the **DOLLAR** you stole from it when **YOU** were **6**. **DO** that and youll **EARN** another **WEEK** 's reprieve - May be! - John ny"*

I haven't thought of that for twenty-five years. I did take

a dollar in change. The box was always left unlocked so those experiencing financial stress could just take what they needed without the humiliation of begging. I guess I felt 'in need' and helped myself. I remember struggling over it in bed for the next several nights but then it dropped out of mind, I guess. I doubt if I ever repaid it, though I really don't remember (big surprise!). Maybe that's when my mind learned the value of repressing things.

The first three words again reflected a fairly private family saying. *Fiddle dee dee*, was mother's favorite swear word - well swear phrase, I suppose. I'm sure visitors to my home here in Springfield might have heard it, though she religiously kept her swearing private within the family circle. (I love that last clause!)

None of my attempts at humor are working this morning. I have checked to make sure I have one hundred dollars to put into the poor box. How will anyone possibly know if I carry out that request? It makes no sense. As if any of this makes any sense.

I'm finally ready to leave (again!). It's 5:40. I wanted to get this all down in my journal before I left. Not sure why. I'll continue later (daaaa - when else could I continue!).

. . . It's noon. I'll write while things are vivid in my memory. I'm at a diner in Lancaster - one at which I ate on my previous trip, but that's getting way ahead.

I drove directly to Evansville and found *White's Gas Station* at the edge of town; I have a gas receipt from there. The attendant - an ancient Mr. White, I assume - was a talkative chap. He remembered me from last week.

"Drivin' a different car this week, I see," he began. "You makin' this run regular now?"

"No. Just a little on-going business to take care of on down the road. Can't believe you remember me. You must service hundreds of customers a week."

"I remember the nice ones. Try to forget the difficult ones."

"Well, I'm glad I don't fall into your forget-in-a-hurry group."

"No Sir. That young fella you picked up here had been waitin' fer hours to find a ride and nobody'd give him the time of

day. Nice kid. Well spoken. Educated, I imagine. From Virginia I think he said. Headin' for Chicago. It was right nice of you to take him as far as Lancaster."

He knew my destination. I assume that he probably overheard me speaking with the young man - a young man I don't recall, of course.

"How old would you say that kid was? I'm a terrible judge of age," I asked, hoping for more.

"Close to your age, I imagine - maybe a few years younger."

I smiled broadly to pave the way for my next question.

"And how old do you think I am?"

I chuckled as if to make a joke of it.

"'Bout thirty-six, I reckon."

"About right-on, Sir. You're a good judge of age."

"Sort of a game I've played for years. How old you say I am?"

It was an uncomfortable turn of the tables. I figured I needed to be honest with him since he had been with me.

"Well preserved mid-seventies," I answered.

"Very good, yourself."

No specific age was provided but then none was called for. I paid with my credit card and was soon on my way. I figured it had been a complement to be classified as a kid. At least that's how I chose to take it.

A hitchhiker? It rang no bell. It isn't out of character for me. I've done it all my life. Apparently, I took him all the way to Lancaster. Perhaps I could learn more at my next receipt - a diner just off the interstate.

I spotted it at a few minutes after nine. The old receipt was time stamped at ten o'clock. I hoped the same shift was working. I hoped they would remember seeing me with the mystery man. I hoped they served a good breakfast - I was suddenly very hungry.

"Hey, Sunshine!" the waitress said, greeting me with a smile and a hand to my shoulder. "Where's your good-looking sidekick today?"

She had remembered me, even if as second fiddle in the looks department.

“Don’t really know him well. I gave him a ride this far from down south.”

Then I had an idea.

“I am trying to locate him, though. He left an envelope in my car.”

“Haven’t seen him in several days. I imagine he left for Chicago. That’s where he said he was headed,” she offered.

She made it appear that he had come in more than once.

“I hoped he’d still be around,” I said, fishing.

“Left three days ago - after breakfast. Took the bus from down the road there.”

She pointed out the window as if I should know about the bus station, then added, “Mickey, over there at the Flamingo, may know how to contact him.”

She pointed out the front window toward the motel across the street.

“Mickey?”

“He’s the day manager. It’s a fleabag but Jack seemed to be on a tight budget.”

“Jack?”

My heart began pounding as I asked for clarification. Jack was often a nickname for John - Johnny.

“Your friend, Jack.”

“Oh. Yes. He and Mickey got to know each other, did they?”

“Breakfast together three mornings in a row if that’s knowing each other.”

“I see. Well, I’m hungry. Hope you’ll serve me without him.”

I smiled and she pointed to a booth. I slipped in and searched for a menu.

“Up above the counter, remember?” she said.

“Oh, yes. That’s right. Convenient actually. The number four looks good.”

“You seemed to like it last time. Scrambled again?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Fluffy or flat?”

“Fluffy, I suppose.” I couldn’t remember ever having been asked that before but scrambled eggs certainly did come

in both varieties - flat from the grill and fluffy from a carefully whisked skillet.

“NUMBER FOUR, FLUFFED” she yelled through the pass-through window. “Coffee and juice like before?”

“Yes. Sounds good. How on Earth do you remember things like that?”

I was beginning to think I was the only one who couldn't.

“Goes with the territory. After fifteen years at it, I guess it just starts comin' naturally.”

She was pleasant and helpful. Her name tag indicated her name was Mary. She looked to be about my age - maybe a little older under all the makeup.

I enjoyed the meal. Mary was liberal with refills even though the sign on the wall set a strict limit of one. I learned that Jack had spent a lot of time in there over a three-day period - mostly writing on his laptop.

I reviewed the receipts in my envelope, folding those from the two places I had already revisited - the gas station in Evansville and now the diner. The next was from Bailey's Sporting Goods Shop. Then Jacque's Floral. That one confused me because there were two receipts within an hour of one another. Credit card receipts have taken crypticism to its limit. (I'm sure that isn't a word but it needs to be.) The earlier of the two reads, “HS WRTH” with a price listed at \$136.00. The second was a refund to my card for \$100.00. I would check it out later. First I was off to the sports store.

That receipt read, “EQPMNT: BSBL-024.” I assumed it translated as, “Equipment: Baseball model number 24.”

Upon inquiring about it, I found I had been right though had to wonder how there could possibly be twenty-four different models of baseballs.

“I need another one just like it,” I said.

That was designed to serve two purposes. First, it would provide a believable reason for stopping in. Second, I would see the ball and hope it brought back some memory.

“Want it ‘almost gift wrapped,’ like before?” the clerk asked smiling and chuckling.

It took me aback but I figured it might be meaningful so I answered:

“Yes, just like before if that’s not too much trouble?”

The ball, still in its small, square box was placed on the counter. A piece of bright red gift wrap was cut, amply large enough to fit it, as was a length of gold ribbon. All three pieces were placed in a bag. Apparently, I had wanted to wrap it myself for some reason. Why? I hate to wrap presents! It came to the same price as before, \$9.12. An interesting consistency in what was surely an irregular type of sale. It seemed to be a hefty price for a baseball, but then there was the wrapping paper.

I paid by credit card and went to the car, eager to open the box and examine the ball. It was just a baseball - white leather with black lacing. Just a baseball. All it brought to mind was pee-wee league ball - the only baseball I’ve ever played. What could its significance be?

The florist shop was clear across town so I decided to stop at the church first. It was close to ten thirty. I took the hundred-dollar bill from my wallet, folded it and slid it into my pants pocket so I could furtively place it into the poor box, assuming it was still there - and somehow, I was sure it would be. That turned out to be easily accomplished. I then went in search of a priest.

I noticed the door with Father O’Malley’s name plate was open so I looked inside. No one was there but my heart stopped as I gazed at the top of his desk. A baseball - new and shiny white, a twin of the one I had just purchased.

I looked up and down the hall. Seeing no one, I went on inside and examined the object of my impending coronary. It had writing on it. “Thanks for your love and understanding. Petie.”

The voice from behind me was only vaguely familiar.

“Not many folks remember John’s ball coaching days.”

I turned into an approaching Father Lester.

“John?” I asked, feeling ever so much like the child just caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Father O’Malley. Yours was the last pee-wee team he coached. He said he was beginning to have trouble controlling his temper with the unruly parents, so he thought it best to retire before he made a fool of himself and the priesthood.”

I nodded as he approached me, his hand held out palm up. It was for the ball not a shake. I placed it in his hand. He rolled it about on his palm until the words came into view.

“He was certainly moved by your visit and this gift, Peter. It was such a nice thing to have done for him. He doesn’t keep gifts - the vow of poverty, you understand - but I imagine he’ll find a way to justify keeping this around for many years to come.”

Father Lester was a priest - a priest with failing memory, two facts that made me feel free to share a few things with him in an effort to receive some useful information. You don’t lie to a priest so how could I approach this?

“I’m glad he likes it. May I ask you something?”

“Of course. Want to come down to my office?”

“No, thank you. It should just take a minute. After I left here last week I was in a car accident and I’ve lost my memory for some of what had taken place just before.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry. Are you alright otherwise?”

“Yes. I’m fine. Confused, of course, but physically I’m fine. I just can’t remember why I came to see Father O’Malley. Do you know?”

The old priest frowned and pursed his lips - a habit I suddenly remembered from childhood.

“I’m not certain. You took confession, I know that much. And then you visited the cemetery together. You were gone the better part of two hours. He was in such a good mood when you dropped him back here. I’m afraid that’s really all I know.”

“This cemetery. Where is it?”

“South on St. Vincent Drive, just past the dairy plant. You have forgotten things, haven’t you my Son?”

“Afraid so. Well, thank you. I appreciate your help. I guess you know I wasn’t in here for any nefarious reason.”

Father Lester smiled.

“Not like the time you *borrowed* the money from the poor box?”

He held out his hand again. I smiled back and took a five from my wallet and held it out. He snatched it playfully.

“Thank you.”

“How in Heaven’s name - well excuse that - but how did

you know and more importantly, how could you remember?"

He smiled and chuckled, shaking his head as if it were for some reason a particularly precious memory.

"You were a terrible thief, Peter; noisy, dropped the coins onto the marble floor, counted out exactly one dollar in change - aloud, no less - and then sneezed right in the middle of the caper sending the bills flying about the vestibule. I was sure at that moment that if you didn't give up your life of crime immediately you'd find yourself in Juvie before the year was out."

He laughed and patted me on the back. I moved toward the door and then remembered the most important element in my purpose for the visit.

"Father O'Malley. You've heard from him?"

"Yes. He left a message on my answering machine. He was unexpectedly called to his sister's in Montana. Something about a nephew's illness. I must admit I didn't even know he had a sister in Montana. Between my hearing loss and the static on the line, I couldn't make it out real well. I've been expecting him to call and clarify it all. I'm sure he has good reason for the long interval that's passed."

I left. It wasn't the really good news I had wanted to hear - that he was definitely safe and sound. The static filled message and the interval - it all gave rise to the possibility that foul play had been afoot. I tried to put that out of mind and preceded to the florist shop, by then being a bit more certain about why I might have made a purchase there. My parents were both buried in Springfield so I wouldn't have been visiting their graves. Perhaps Grandfather and Grandmother Thompson, Mom's parents.

Jacque turned out to be 'Wilma' but that was okay. She remembered me and that a priest had remained in the car while I made my purchase. That confirms he was still with me at that time - 1:51 according to the first receipt.

The bump on the head story had worked so well with Father Lester that I gave it another try. It not only worked but garnered me a free carnation, pinned to my shirt and a compassionate pat on the shoulder.

"Just what was it that I bought? The receipt says an

HSWRTH-C, I believe.”

I showed it to her.

“Yes. I remember.”

She nodded as she turned and scanned the contents of the refrigerated compartments that spanned the rear of the store.

“That’s our computereez for headstone wreath - child’s. There it is through the third door from the left.”

I walked back with her and she pointed it out.

“It’s hard to find something suitable for a child’s grave,” she said. “I’ve always thought this little sailing ship with mums and baby breath was really nice. I guess you did, too.”

“Yes,” I said, agreeing through my complete and utter bewilderment.

That seemed to leave out the grandparents unless I had been drolly celebrating their second childhood.

“There is one more thing about my previous visit that puzzles me. I have two receipts. The one I showed you is for \$100 more than the price I saw just now on the wreath I purchased. Then on this second one, I see an RFND - I assume that means refund - of the hundred dollars. That is date and time stamped about a half hour later.”

“Yes. I remember. I was working on the displays and our new girl was at the register - her first shift by herself. She evidently keyed the number one in front of the actual price and neither of you noticed it. I remember when you returned that another clerk came up to help her work it out. I didn’t know what it was all about and being behind, as I always seem to be, I just didn’t pay attention. Well, that’s not entirely true. I did notice the priest wasn’t with you that time. I guess I’m just a busy body at heart.”

I thanked her for her help and for the mum, and left. I drove to the cemetery - she had given me directions - holding the vision of the sailboat wreath in mind. I would walk the area until I came across it. Then I should finally have at least a partial answer to all this.

An hour later I was no closer to a solution than I had been before my visit to the cemetery. There was no sailing ship. In fact, there were no wilted offerings at all. A sign at the entrance

said all flowers and wreaths were removed after three days. I did go ahead and read all the stones. It seems a blur now, but at the time I found nothing that seemed meaningful. I would need to await the return of Father O'Malley to discover which grave we had visited. When I got back into the car my pulse was racing and my lungs were pumping as if I'd just run up the steps chasing Rocky. I had - and have - no idea why.

As I sit here finishing my late lunch, pressing every last morsel of graham cracker crust from my cheesecake between the tines of my fork, I am working on the theory that it was probably the grave of one of my friends - probably a kid I played ball with as a child. Perhaps he had died shortly after I left Lancaster and I had for some reason been moved to go back and place the wreath. It is even more likely that I had not known of the boy's death and only upon visiting with Father O'Malley over my gift to him had I learned of it. I have decided not to get too caught up in that single facet of things.

The Father's hurried leave taking and subsequent silence, gnaws at me. Certainly, it wasn't Father John who was behind all this, was it? Too many Johns. (I suddenly envision a six-room house with ten bathrooms! Oh, well. I've always known my mind was twisted - just really didn't think it was crazy.)

There is another interesting continuum to think about - from twisted on the left to crazy on the right. I wonder at what point you leave one and enter the other and if the twisted end truly resides within sane territory. I read somewhere once that all habitual punsters live lives that teeter on the edge of reality. That would be me, I suppose. It's never posed a problem before. It's been quite comfortable - for me at least. That's interesting. I wonder if I tend to sow discomfort to those about me.

Focus!!

Now I have to wonder about the timeline that day. Father O'Malley was with me at the florist's the first time but not the second time - about half an hour later. Yet Father Lester said I dropped him off at the church a little before three. Perhaps Father Lester didn't actually see me drop him off, but just assumed it was me. If not me, though, who and why? It could

be that someone we met at the cemetery was going back to the church, so Father rode with him or her to save me the trouble? That seems logical, but then, what does logic have to do with any of this? I could have gone back to the cemetery and picked him up after returning to the florist, I suppose. Maybe he had additional things to do at the cemetery. Maybe I was merely transporting him there. Maybe the wreath was for him and not for me at all. That probably makes the most sense.

Perhaps that must be my strategy - to discover things that will move the facts from the illogical to the logical side of the ledger. I'm not sure that I will recognize logical when I meet it.

. . . The waitress just brought me the local paper. It's not as well written as ours. Uses lots of canned fill from other sources. I have to assume it has a limited staff of reporters. Still, it contains ads up the wazoo, so to speak. It's hard to find the articles for all the big, bold, gaudy, advertisements. Must have run a two for one sale because I see many of them are repeated from one page to another.

A light bulb just lit above my head. I could see it happening - a sudden yellow glow with black lines radiating from it just like in the cartoons. THIS paper is printed in the Bookman Font. I suppose I could add, '*The plot thickens,*' and exploit clichés from *both* the visual and verbal realms. Suppose nothing! I just did!!!

There are at least two more things to be taken care of before I leave Lancaster - visit with Mickey across the street at the Motel and go to the library to search back issues of the local, daily paper - what's it called? Let me look. . . . Imagine that, "*The Daily Local.*"

I'll hit the library first.

"Mary, is the library still on First Avenue?" I called to her across the room.

"You got me. Never been near one. Afraid I might catch the smarts, you know?"

"You're spoofing me, of course."

"I guess so. You're just so spoofable."

(I translated that as gullible as she continued.)

"Yes, right where it's been forever. Doubled the size a

few years back to add a computer center.”

I paid the check, laid down a hefty tip and left wondering if it might be the last time I'd ever eat there. Apparently, I often wondered about such things and wondered if other people also often wondered about such things. (Another diagramer's nightmare!)

An overly efficient library person helped me find the newspapers and then pestered me for the next ten minutes, repeatedly asking if she could help me find anything.

What was I to say? “Sure find the places in one of the recent issues that contain the words and phrases pasted onto my most recent . . .” What would they be called? Just *threats*, I suppose.

There were two copies of each edition - except for the one I determined had to have been used for the note. There was only one of it. It was dated the day before my previous visit back to Lancaster. Who would have had access to it? Jack, O'Malley, Mickey even. Another light bulb!

I thanked the pest - er, the helpful library person - and made my way to the newspaper office. I was impressed that anything at all could be produced in such a ramshackle facility and only hoped that I made it back outside safely before it collapsed.

“I'm Peter Alexander and I manage a bookshop in Springfield,” I opened to the only person to be seen. “I am considering placing your paper in the store and just wondered if anybody from over there currently subscribes to it.”

She looked at me over the top of her thick, horn-rimmed glasses and begrudgingly pulled out the drawer from an ancient, green, metal, card file.

“Springfield. Springfield. Springfield,” she repeated as she apparently searched for that label on one of the dividers.

“Yes. The Methodist Church takes it. That's all I see in here.”

I thanked the woman and left. Everything about the place gave me the Willies (maybe that willies with a lower-case 'w'). I felt the need for an immediate shower even though I had touched nothing while inside. (Now, I'm obsessing about just what a willie - upper or lower case - might be.)

The Methodist Church raised an interesting, though unlikely connection. The street with all the nice people, which dead-ends into my apartment building, suddenly took on an insidiously sinister shroud. Peeping Grumps, the telescope boys, and, now, the Methodist minister with some clandestine interest in Lancaster. I even became uneasy about the most openly violent and hostile resident I had witnessed there - the three-year-old boy on his tricycle.

I sat in my car, suddenly washed by terror beyond all that was reasonable. I locked the doors and checked my briefcase for the gun, leaving the case unlocked for easy access. There were crazy thoughts during those next few minutes. The hitchhiker was a hypnotist and he had hypnotized me and made me tell him all my secrets, then left me this helpless amnesiac. He hadn't really gone on to Chicago, but had returned to Springfield - with a copy of the local paper - to shake me down. Shake me up seems a more apt phrase considering how things have developed.

After a few minutes, I started the car and made my way back toward the motel across from the diner. I parked, took several deep breaths, and went into the office.

"Mickey, I hope," I said, greeting the smiling young man extracting himself from the thread bare recliner by the TV.

"Mickey, it is," he replied, clicking off the TV sound as he stood and approached the desk.

"How many nights?" he asked turning the register in my direction.

"No. I came for information not a room. I'll gladly pay for it if that's how it goes."

"Depends on the information, I suppose. Can't imagine I know anything worth a red cent, actually - unless you need a good guess at Vana's measurements."

He chuckled and I mirrored it. It was actually fairly humorous, I thought.

"Remember a man about my age named Jack who stayed here a few nights last week?"

"Jack! Sure. Too classy to stay here. Down on his luck I assume. He didn't say and I didn't ask. I don't ask anybody anything. If they choose to stay here I just assume they got

themselves into some kind of a pickle. What about him?"

"He hitched a ride here with me last week and when I got back home I discovered he'd left an envelope in my car. I'm trying to find an address or phone number so I can contact him."

Mickey looked me over suspiciously. It probably sounded pretty much just like the line of baloney that it was.

"Well, he signed the register, John B. Jackson and gave a home address of 777 Willow Lane in Rossville, New York. Seems like I've heard that address before, now that I say it out loud."

"You a mystery reader?"

"Yes, I am. How could you tell."

"The address is that of Raymond Masters, the detective in the Garrison Flint books."

"So, it is. So, it is. Well, I suppose that won't help you much then. Sorry. Said he was heading for Chicago. Took the noon bus. I do know that much. A needle in a haystack by now, I imagine."

"I imagine. Well, thanks for your time. What do I owe you?"

"If you're serious, how about one of them Detective books from your store?"

"Give me your address and I'll get in the mail to you tomorrow."

He handed me his business card; it was actually some former attendant's card with Mickey's name penciled in. I assume the turnover in day clerks at such establishments is probably high - speaking of 'down on your luck'. I left and drove back across the road to the diner to finish writing these notes. The coffee here is terrible - possibly by intent. I assume that for most patrons the owner has very little trouble enforcing the one refill rule. Perhaps it is even meant to be humorous in a dark or sick sort of way.

Coffee to me is like fingernails to a nail biter. As long as it's there I'll go for it - regardless of the pain it may inflict at that moment or in the future.

"Mary," I called softly just to get her attention.

"Yep," she said looking in my direction as she reached for the coffee pot and headed across the narrow room.

I shook off the pot.

“Just wondered if you happened to keep any copies of the bus schedule here.”

“I think there should be one here somewhere. Yep. Right where I thought it should be. Imagine that! Here you go. Sure no more coffee?”

“I’m coffeed up to here,” I said, my hand to my forehead. “Thanks. I’ll make sure I leave it here.”

Mary moved on and I looked over the schedule. Bus schedules were an interesting contrivance. Perhaps the only type of written document for which a college degree seemed to be a distinct disadvantage. Never could understand it but give a bus schedule to a Ph.D. and he’d end up in Timbuktu rather than anywhere close to his intended destination. Give one to a 6<sup>th</sup> grade dropout and in 60 seconds he’d have a route planned and committed to memory that would take him from Tallahassee to Anchorage - via the back roads, no less.

After a few minutes of struggling I determined that it was the same schedule every day. One bus to Chicago every morning and one bus going south to Memphis every noon. Jack had left when? Noon. My! My! Hard to get to Chicago by way of Memphis. Why would he lie? Because he didn’t want folks to know where he was headed. Why come this far north only to turn around and head back south - through Evansville, no less? Things to ponder.

How did Mickey know I worked in a bookstore? I might have mentioned it to Jack on the ride to Lancaster - or while he had me hypnotized!!!! He could have mentioned it to Mickey when he told him about the guy who brought him to town. Why wouldn’t Mickey have said that he’d heard about me from Jack when I introduced myself? Maybe just so used to being closed mouthed about his clientele that he didn’t consider it.

That address Jack used was interesting as well. We may have talked about our reading preferences. Knowing I enjoyed those books, he chose to use that address - as if to leave a message behind for me when I came looking for him. Was it some clue about how to find him or was it his way of laughing in my face? If he expected me to come looking, he had to have something to do with my problems - didn’t he?

Confusion! Blessed confusion! The savior of my sanity yet the center of my distress. Interesting. Some confusion seems to be just that - plain and simple confusion, all fairly emotionless. Other confusion is clearly distressing. I imagine the more distressing it is the more sanity it reflects because the contrasts remain vivid. The less emotional confusion sits far closer to the opposite pole - less intense contrasts, well on the way to washing them out completely. *Insanity: the state of minimal contrasts*. Day by day such a state becomes more and more attractive. I must not think that way! I must cherish the contrasts - the distressing, confusing, contrasts.

## Chapter Six: *Perplexing Punctuation*

I have given up being afraid of sleep. It is terrifying but I have to sleep so I do. I arrived back at my apartment at dusk last evening. It had been a tiring day both physically and emotionally. I must have fallen asleep immediately; I don't even remember getting into bed.

My night terrors are becoming more vividly visual. There is a face that often approaches clarity but then fades in a discomfoting clatter of some kind. Last night, for the first time, I heard screams associated with that din. Terribly freighting screams - perhaps terribly frightened screams. Interesting. Frightening refers to my own emotional reaction. Frightened refers to the emotional state of the source. Last night it was as if the two had blended - become one. I can't explain it beyond that. If I could only bring that face into focus for just a split second.

Again, interesting! I'm sitting here, hanging out with my conscious mind, feeling the need to see that face. My unconscious mind, with whom I hang out during sleep, seems to be working overtime to keep me from seeing it. It's a battle, isn't it?! I'm truly not sure if that deserved a ? or a ! so I gave it both. My, that is fascinating. The question mark clearly asks a question. The exclamation point often indicates a command. My thoughts are fusing the question and the command. Polar opposites are becoming one. I don't like my analysis. I always over analyze - I always have. Fusion of logical opposites has to represent insanity. Oh, my God?! What is happening!?

. . . I'm on break at work about 10:00 a.m. I'm feeling better. Cindy is relating to me as if I'm the same old Pete I've

always been. I think that's a very good sign - reassuring. I've been forcing myself on customers just to remain engaged in something outside of myself. It has helped but the customers will eventually leave and I will be left alone again. That's not a good thing. I think I will spend the night at the cabin. I'll take fried chicken or something and feed Chance - bribe him so I won't have to be alone all evening. I'll buy a can of top grade tuna - Cat loves tuna. Maybe I can entice him to remain inside with me tonight. It's supposed to rain. My how I hope it does. Cat stays inside when it rains. I'll even put the damn laptop on the floor for him! That should seem humorous, but today it's a straight out, matter of fact, survival plan.

How pathetic can one adult male become? My big evening, my survival plan, revolves around a toothless old man who's long overdue for his eternal rest and an overly amorous Tomcat whose loyalty to me rests solely on how well I feed and stroke him. I wonder if that's the true basis for all loyalty?

I'm living a loveless life. Never thought of it that way before. Loveless. My. Now that's sad. Even Chance has his fishing, and Cat his female felines. I have a Cactus that stays alive just to spite me. I hate it - straggly and prickly, and I'm sure it maintains its yellowing hue just to aggravate me. But I'm somehow compelled to preserve its fully useless life. It produces no flowers - no seeds. I suppose it's a whole lot like me. Maybe that's why I hate it so. Better hate a useless cactus than a useless me. Wow! Perhaps that's the basis of most hate! A kind of out of body substitute target.

I wonder if I do hate myself? There, finally a pure question again. Why would I hate myself? I'm a nice guy. Anybody who knows me will tell you that. Ask my customers. Ask Cindy. Ask Jane, Chance or Cat. Ask any one of the dozen women I've been in love with during the past ten years. So, I stole money from God Himself as a boy. So, I stole Tommy's one chance for a loving girl during his lifetime. So, I killed somebody last week. I'm still a nice guy. I am!?

. . . Fortunately, I imagine, Cindy interrupted me to make sure she had the right mystery novel for Mickey, before entrusting it to the man in the big brown truck. *The Murder No One Committed* somehow seemed appropriate, considering my

current state of information, so that had been my selection - perhaps my hope-filled selection.

It's late. I'm at the cabin. I stayed at the store until five thirty. Bruce and Adam dropped in late and I let them look to their hearts content. It was good to have company even if they had inched their way up my suspect list during the last forty-eight hours - part of the Maple Street Conspiracy. Two sales. One was a biography of Ty Cobb. The other was a book on conceptual quantum physics with a title which, in and of itself, required another book to explain it. Nice kids. Bright. Polite. No horsing around. Both are good conversationalists. If I could come by a pair just like them - no diaper period or learning of times tables period - I might consider settling down. (Still have to use the calculator for  $6 \times 9$ , myself! Even the calculator seems to scratch its chips over  $7 \times 8$ !)

Clearly my walk through the neighborhood had not been in vain (said the disappointed vampire!). Apparently, it had reminded the boys where I was and what I did, and this afternoon sold two books. Another six-dollar profit for J. A.

What about J. A.? I work hard for his benefit. I've turned his shop around in the past five years. We turn a hefty profit every month now. He's fiftyish, single, a loner, not particularly attractive (the down side of plain, actually). He's a John! (Probably in more than one sense of the word.) Could he be jealous of me and my women, my better than average looks, Cat? (A smile! How nice!!!!)

I got to Chance's cabin about six. The Colonel and I provided a fried chicken feast with all the usual trimmings. Come to find out it was the old man's favorite. That pleased me and even, perhaps, eased my guilt for trying to buy his companionship. I guess I'm not seriously suspecting him or I wouldn't have spent two hours alone with him. Well, Cat chaperoned for the first thirty minutes. It came as a surprise to me but Cat preferred the chicken to the tuna. Since coming up here to the cabin, however, he has lowered himself to an occasional nibble at the can I left open near the front door.

A gentle drizzle set in as I pulled in out front. Cat was waiting on the steps and moved up onto the porch as the drops began to fall. He moved no further than absolutely necessary,

of course. Cats are masters at energy conservation. They even yawn conservatively. They always seem to consider every possibility before making a move as if searching for the path of least resistance. I, on the other hand, am more impulsive - reckless - in my decision making. I'm neat but reckless. Another continuum for consideration - the Recklessness Continuum with 'neat recklessness' on one end and 'messy recklessness' on the other. Most likely it doesn't reflect any degree of sanity. More likely some aspect of maturity or anality.

Focus!!!

I need to summarize what I know and what I need to find out. I'll begin with the first.

My car went off the cliff just below Green County Campground - I just learned its name from Chance. Doesn't ring a bell. Chance found me wandering around close to where the car slid to a halt in the valley below. That was fifteen to twenty minutes after he saw the car take the dive. It didn't burn upon impact - the tank was empty and I found a spot on the road above where gasoline had been drained - or poured - onto the grass. I had a bad bump to the back of my head. I have no recollection of the accident or the entire vacation week prior to which it took place. Chance reports that I spent the week in my cabin. He didn't see me come or go after I arrived.

I know I was gone on Wednesday because I have credit card receipts and eyewitness reports of me in both Evansville and my old home town of Lancaster. It could be that I left quite early and returned quite late - a likely probability considering the distance - and Chance just missed me. But that's in the realm of speculation - informed speculation. (Another continuum to consider sometime: 'Informed Speculation' at one end and 'Ignorant Speculation' at the other. Informed being fact-based and Ignorant being opinion based. Unfortunately, I believe, most folks seem satisfied with the latter.)

The doctor, rendering his six hundred dollars learned opinion (informed speculation???), stipulated that I did not receive a concussion. That, coupled with the fact that the bruise is on the back of my head and the slide marks I found on the hill going from the road to the crash site, lead me to question whether or not I was actually in the car when it went off the road.

(Again, informed speculation. I wonder where 'wishful thinking' sits in that paradigm?)

Cinched onto the front seat of the car was an old backpack which contained boys' toys and things from the era when I would have been six or so. They call up no specific memories for me.

Chance took me home the night of the accident - he says so and Jane confirms it. It was the last day of my vacation. My first memory occurred as I awakened in my bed the following morning. The previous seven days were and remain a blank. The remnant of that void seemed to have lingered as I attempted to rouse into consciousness that morning. I couldn't remember where I was until I opened my eyes - and I seemed to have resisted doing that in the dubious name of 'fascination'.

The following aspects of my one day trip to Lancaster seem to be verifiable. I stopped for gas in Evansville (though I still don't understand why I took such a roundabout route to Lancaster - unless I didn't know where I was headed when I started out - interesting!).

I picked up a hitchhiker who called himself Jack - John Jackson on the motel register - and dropped him off in Lancaster at the diner where he and I ate breakfast (according to, Mary, the waitress). He lodged at an inexpensive motel for several days before leaving for somewhere (ostensibly, Chicago).

I visited Father O'Malley at St. Agnes Church and he accompanied me to the Cemetery on St. Vincent's Drive. On the way we stopped at Jacques's Florals and I purchased a wreath for a child's grave. (I am assuming we proceeded to the cemetery and deposited the wreath at some appropriate gravesite, but I have no verification of that.) When I returned to the florist's a half hour later to clear up an over charge the priest wasn't with me. Oh, yes, according to Father Lester I went to confession with Father O'Malley before we left for the cemetery. Haven't been to confession in fifteen years. Father got an ear full if I was honest. Probably required five hundred rosaries. That in itself would be enough to cause my amnesia (smile!). Also, I stopped to purchase a baseball for O'Malley who had coached me in pee-wee league. I wrote a thank you phrase on

it. (I have no idea what prompted that. It appears that it may well have been the reason for the trip. Why?)

Father Lester says I brought O'Malley back to the church at about three - which fits the time-line but seems to be unverified by an actual sighting of me or my car. O'Malley was at least seen at the church after three. Sometime later he left a seemingly garbled phone message for Father Lester relating to an unexpected trip to his sister's in Montana (sister's existence unknown) and hasn't been seen or heard from since - that's well over a week ago. (Could it have been I who left that phone message, disguising my voice, after I disposed of him?)

Now the biggies. I have received four threatening notes - the last two signed Johnny. Three were made up of words cut from the local paper and the fourth from the Lancaster paper. The first threatened blackmail - apparently for a money payment. It purported a video tape - a grey video tape - of me killing somebody. The next said I was too poor to be a good source for money so he (or she) would just kill me instead. The third required me to make a \$2,000 restitution to Tommy for a twenty-year-old mis-deed. It was signed, "Johnny."

Finally, the fourth required me to put \$100 into the poor box at St. Agnes church in Lancaster to repay - one hundred-fold - the dollar I stole from it as a six year old. (Interestingly, Father Lester knew about that. Who would he have told? O'Malley, maybe. I thought Lester was on leave that year.) Also interesting is that the note came on the morning I was leaving for my return trip to Lancaster. Coincidence? Probably. Maybe? Doubtful!

Two of the notes contained private family content that could not have been widely known. I found that I have \$2,000 missing from my bank account - that's not really accurate. The teller reported that I wrote a check for cash in that amount the week before my trip to Lancaster, so, it is accounted for I guess - not technically missing.

Is there anything else? Well, the Methodist Church here subscribes to the Lancaster paper. I need to find out why, I guess. Its retired minister lives in one of the three houses with visual access into my apartment. An old man who spends time looking out his window is also within visual range. Then the two

teenagers with a telescope and a wandering eye which searches for nude girls in bedrooms, inhabit the second floor of the third two-story down that street. They happen to be cousins of Tommy, to whom I was asked to pay the retribution money. It is a small town - relatively speaking (pun intended! Not good, but intended!!).

If the blackmailer is to be believed - and I'm not sure that I have any good reason to do that - he has given me a reprieve from my death sentence for another week or so. My biggest questions about him have to do with why he wants to kill me for having killed whoever. Perhaps it was a relative of his. That makes sense. Or a close friend. How does he know these intimate things from my past? Well, stealing Tommy's girl was pretty open I guess. It made the yearbook, but the dollar from the poor box??? Even the fact that I came here from Lancaster. If it is someone who has been out to get me for some time, he had to have been following me at the time I committed the murder. If it is not that kind of situation, then it is an opportunist - just there with the camera. Of course, I have no proof there is a videotape of any event and none has been offered to me. I may not have killed anyone. If I were sure of that I would not be giving in like I've been doing. I would have filed a police report on the accident so I could file an insurance claim and get a new car. Something deep inside that black hole in my mind won't let me do those things. It seems correct even though it seems completely contradictory to the me I've always known.

If I did kill somebody it could have either been an accidental or it could have been on purpose. An accident surely wouldn't be putting me through this hell. Would it? Maybe! If on purpose, who? Who have I ever known who I would consider killing? Unless that person has been erased along with the vacation week, there just is no such person. Could I have come upon someone doing some despicable act to someone else - a child, an old person - and over reacted, killing them? Ah ha!! If so, then wouldn't there be a witness for me? That victim would surely come forward to thank me. Unless the victim had already been killed when I came upon the situation. Where is that body? I would have had to hide it as well, I suppose, in order to cover up my own killing. Perhaps the

would-be killer or molester got away while I was trying to help the victim. Maybe while taking him or her for help in my car I accidentally killed him - as in the car accident. The bad guy then videoed the accident and me hiding that body and it is he who is now blackmailing me. My head is spinning.

On to what I still need to find out. It couldn't hurt to look up a John Jackson in both Chicago and Evansville - probably ten pages of John Jacksons in the Chicago book. Maybe listed in the yellow pages under *writer*. Maybe locate a recent bibliography of magazine articles on the internet under his name. I can't do any of that until I get back to civilization and phone lines. I either need to get a phone out here or change to wireless internet.

Why would Jack have stayed in Lancaster for three days? Was he writing an article about something there? The motel and its unsavory past? The diner and its unsavory coffee? With no internet connection at the motel or diner, it was likely to have been some project self-contained within his laptop. If someone had only heard where he was from instead of where he was going - another thing I really don't seem able to trust.

What would have prompted me to go to Lancaster by way of Evansville? I've wondered that before in these pages. I wondered if it was because I just started out - not knowing my destination at first. As if I had started running away from something - the killing maybe. But I was still in my own car so if that's the scenario the killing didn't involve the accident. It would have come earlier in the week. If that's all true then Jack, who I met in Evansville, couldn't have been a part of it - well, unless he had hypnotized me and thereby discovered my secret. Why do I keep referring to hypnosis? All that, of course, is absurd! (Those double punctuation marks again. They happen before I know what's going on.) It is possible that as I thought things through - as I was on the lam - it occurred to me that I needed the counsel or forgiveness of Father O'Malley. Was the ball a peace offering or a way to get my foot in his door? I don't know.

Back to Evansville. If my going there had not just been a chance decision, then what could its purpose have been?

Had Jack been a friend of mine who called me, said he needed a ride and I went to take care of him? Unlikely since there's no phone out here, unless I had arranged it earlier. Probably not. The attendant at the gas station said he'd been trying to get a ride all morning. He wouldn't have been soliciting rides if he knew I was coming for him.

Evansville. Evansville. It's relatively meaningless to me. I've been through it but I can't remember spending much time there. Ah ha! A thought here. When I have an address, I need to take with me, my habit is to jot it down on a post-it and save it in my wallet. If I were on my way to some specific destination in a strange city I would have done that.

. . . Back. That was just really far too easy. What's going on in this head of mine? I found the post-it, yellow and sticky, stuck to the lining. 3938 South Castor Bean Way. No town - just the street address. If it were an address to which I was expecting to mail something it would have at least included the zip code if not the town. It was a place I was going to visit. How many cities can possibly have a street named Castor Bean Way? Hopefully only one within easy driving distance of Springfield. Again, that will have to wait until I can get to a phone book or online white pages and maps. That post-it was the only foreign, unexpected thing in my wallet. No credit card receipts which sometimes make their way into it, though my fairly dependable habit is to shove them into the glove compartment. How do you suppose that little hide-a-way came to be called a glove compartment? Maybe back in the automobile's neonatal period - when each one came with its own repair kit - that hole in the dashboard was actually used to store gloves. That makes sense. That distracts me from my mission!?

Assuming for a moment that the address is a place in Evansville, it is probably a new place to me; otherwise I wouldn't have needed the address. I'm good that way - once at a place I can always make my way back - well, except for the cemetery in Lancaster, but that would seem to be somehow tied up with my amnesia. I suppose it's amnesia.

. . . Cat just asked to leave. I opened the door for him and it hit me. I had a state road map in the car. I brought it

inside. It took me just long enough for Cat to decide to return to the dry warmth of the cabin. He has taken up residence on the little braided rug in front of the fireplace, his pride seeming hurt because his fur got wet in the rain. I spread the map out on the table and scanned it for an inset of Evansville. There it was, and there, also, was Caster Bean Way - a major thoroughfare running north and south.

I put the map into my briefcase shuddering at the sight of the gun there. Guns, especially hand guns, have always posed a quandary for me. They were invented by the one species in the known universe that has the innate capacity to solve its disagreements and continually relate in a peaceful, forward looking manner. And, yet, the gun's sole purpose is to maim and kill. I suppose that makes it a monument to man's tragic failure to assure that each new generation is raised in love and safety rather than hate and fear or some other level of unconcern for the ultimate preservation of the species. Then something else hit me. Beside the gun was a new pack of post-its with only one pad missing. They were all yellow. I always use blue. They had been recently purchased and either I had ignored my usual preference because I was in a hurry or the store was out. Either way it suggested that with that address having been written on yellow, it was a very recent note to myself.

Lots of facts and informed speculation here, but no order to them - no sense flows from them. It appears that another trip to Evansville is in my immediate future. Saturday. It's my weekend off from the store.

That video bugs me. Why would BM refer to it as the Grey Video Tape? Color or black and white I could understand though I really don't know if black and white video tape is manufactured. Maybe that's more a function of the camera or settings. No idea. But Grey!? Could it be a brand name like Sony? Never heard of it, if it is. Unlikely. Grey could also refer to the kind of day - a grey day - so the tape might show that. I don't know. Grey Tape? No, Grey Video Tape. Perhaps the deed that BW taped was seen by him as grey - neither white (good) or black (evil). Could the letters G. R. E. Y. stand for something? Nothing chains to that for me. I'll let it go for now.

All the writing that I accomplished in one short week amazes me. I worked at the bookshop that Saturday so the earliest that I could have come out here was that evening. That would have given me until the following Sunday evening when Chance took me home. Take one day out for the trip to Lancaster and the second Sunday afternoon for my assumed visit to the campground and accident, and that leaves about five and a half days. It's possible I could have written that much if my mind was on a tear - and it would have had to have been.

The first dozen or so of those pages were 'painful' - an odd choice of word and phrasing. I mean they represented and described the agony of the two parents when they realized their child was missing in the blizzard. Helpless, guilt-filled, agony. I am amazed at how well I wrote about their feelings when I'm fully devoid of any parental connection at that level. The rest is also good - not so emotionally driven in content but still realistically intense and desperate.

Intense and desperate! I suppose that's how this piece is becoming. It's how I feel when I let myself feel. I have in some way built a wall against my emotions or encapsulated the most horrendous of those feelings so I can cope with my regular life. Again, interesting - regular life, as if this problem is somehow irregular. Well, I would hope so.?! Those DAMN marks.

If I could only open up my head and examine my mind. I know. Mind is the process that takes place in my brain. It won't exist physically anywhere for me to find or touch or see. Still, how I wish I could.

I've resigned myself to the fact that my blacked out week is ~~spyclogal~~ ~~psycloigfoeal~~ psychological - well, at least I thought I had. Some part of me certainly doesn't want to admit that, does it???? Absolutely fascinating. The inner war continues - escalates even, perhaps. Freud would probably be right proud of my subconscious mind at this moment. (smile) And to think, I had dismissed old Siggy years ago as just a great writer of fantasy like the renowned religious writers down through history. Explanatory fantasy is almost always akin to religion and is the reason it survives - to explain the as yet unexplainable and protect folks from having to face the

inevitable mortality of their existence.

That certainly didn't sound like the pronouncement of a good Catholic boy, did it? I knew I had drifted from the church. I guess I didn't realize that I had drifted into something so far removed. It produced just a twinge of guilt - not thoroughgoing guilt. Not even 'probably ought to remember that for confession' kind of guilt. Just a twinge - as if it were a left-over reaction. Like the chill that runs up my spine when I hear an unfamiliar noise while walking past an alley late at night - would have been scary when I was ten but not really now - just an automatic, left over, reaction that's presently out of place. Misplaced psychic elements. Fascinating. That's more Skinner than Freud, I guess.

It's also interesting that I seem to have lots to say about guilt (at least I'm spelling it correctly the first time) and that discussion was fired by my acceptance of this as being psychological amnesia rather than trauma induced. Amnesia and guilt or more properly ordered, guilt and then amnesia, I suppose. Although it could have been amnesia to prevent the guilt some part of me knew would automatically or inevitably follow some act. Either way, guilt about what? About killing somebody, if I did. I can understand that. Would I have guilt about it if it had been done in self-defense or in defense of somebody else? I don't know. Maybe just a twinge. Interesting. Again, the twinge word. I'm not sure that's accurate, though. Taking a human life has always been highest on my list of abhorrent acts. I probably couldn't actually survive it without guilt or one of its close relatives - shame, compunction, contrition - no, it would be thorough-going guilt!?

That leads me to wonder why on earth I'd have gone to confession for any reason. I haven't believed in that stuff for years. Maybe I experienced a momentary relapse back into religion! Perhaps my motivation was to make Father O'Malley feel good, or feel good about me. I am, unfortunately, deep into trying to make others like me. Of course, if I confessed to having killed somebody that probably wouldn't have made his day, would it?

Cat just looked up at me and meowed. Wonder if he can read minds. If so was that an "I agree" meow or an "I disagree"

meow? How ridiculous can my thoughts become? If it gets worse than this, I hope I don't recognize it. Well, that doesn't dare be the case either. Maybe I'm over thinking again. I always over think.

It poses an interesting question: Can a madman ever bring himself back to sanity by himself - without assistance, I mean. Have I now slipped into that situation? If insanity is an inappropriate, though more comfortable, solution to an unfaceable, real life problem, would I be feeling this much distress if mad? Perhaps. This state, as disturbing as it seems, may actually be far more comfortable than having to face the abhorrent deed, or at least my subconscious estimate of how terrible coming to grips with it would be.

If that's true, I should just give up my search because I'll never let myself find it. Perhaps that's what creates the foundation for suicide - not hopelessness, but the unbearable fear that a hoped-for solution is imminent - a consciously hoped for solution that the subconscious understands will be emotionally devastating. Wow!?

Let me get focused onto something that may actually be helpful in my present dilemma. All day my attention seemed to be scattered. Cindy would call my name and I'd apparently fail to respond.

At one point, she asked, "You need a set of ear candles to clean the wax out? They have them at the Tarot shop down the street."

She had been serious. It had been an attempt to be helpful. It contained not a grain of sarcasm.

"Good suggestion," I said, pulling at my ear lobe. "I'll stop by later on."

It seemed to satisfy her. I wouldn't do the ear candle thing but I would try and remember to do the peroxide and warm-water syringe thing when I got home. I doubt if it's related to wax-impaired hearing. Probably just attention. I heard customers just fine all day and experienced no difficulty on the phone. I just need to focus better tomorrow.

That reminds me. Poor old Chance. He must be soon to leave his 80's. He never can seem to remember my name. It's like every time we meet he calls me something different. I

only hope that when I reach his age I can fend for myself as well as he does. A little memory problem seems quite insignificant stacked up against all the things he still does so well.

I wonder how old Cat is - in people years. Is that seven to one like in dogs? His regular appetite for the fairer sex suggests he's somewhere between - what - fifteen and fifty? I don't know much about sexual appetite after fifty. Probably less than an every-night yearning at any rate. Cat is certainly no kitten. He's not what you could call playful. All species seem to share that - the young begin life being playful. I wonder if that just eventually fades away due to some physical predisposition or if the cares and responsibilities of adulthood overwhelm it. I wonder at what point it occurs. I was certainly still playful as a teenager. I'm not anymore. Cat's not, anymore. At some point, it slipped from obvious to obscure, from active to latent (if not gone entirely). All things considered I'll say Cat and I are about the same age; I'd certainly be with a woman every night if my life were arranged so that could happen.

Being the same age poses a related dilemma: I'd never pet another guy my age and yet with Cat it seems fine. I think I need to leave that topic - beat a hasty retreat might more accurately reflect my feeling.

. . . Cat IS a mind reader! The ink wasn't dry on the paragraph above when he leaped his easy leap up onto my lap (without feeling the need to ask permission, of course), clearly ready to allow me some stroking time. His motor is idling a bit louder than usual this evening. I can even feel it vibrating against my leg. Maybe he just sensed I needed a friend. Maybe he just realized he needed a friend and that - for better or worse - old Pete was as good as it was going to get tonight. He seems to have written off the laptop. (smile)

He closes his eyes while I'm petting him. I wonder if that's to increase his pleasure by shutting out some harsher reality of his world. What harsher reality of his world? He eats. He sleeps. He bathes. He sleeps. He gets stroked. He sleeps. He has sex. He sleeps. Sometimes he even sleeps then he sleeps. Oh, to have been born a cat!? Maybe I was in a former life. Cat and I seem to have a rapport beyond what most folks have with cats. Maybe not. What am I saying? I don't believe

in former lives. I'm having enough difficulty believing in this life.

That was an interesting and disturbing sentence - well, really, the thought reflected by that sentence. (Just a period there. That's good.) It seemed to say that this entire situation appears to be an impossibility - an unreality. Something I can't believe is really happening. I guess I've said that before, even if not in those same, bottom-line, words.

I can either put the blame for that feeling on BM because I believe he's lying about the whole thing or on me for not wanting to face the possibility that I may have a dark, perhaps long hidden, unacceptable side. I'm again, exhausted. Cat will have to make do with the heat from the fire. I'll bank up a couple more logs and then hit the sack. I hate to go to sleep.

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## **Chapter Seven: *The Punctilious, Punishing, Pungent, Pundit***

I hate to wake up!?

I suppose that poses a bind, doesn't it? I hate to be asleep and I hate to be awake. About the only remaining alternative is dead. That seems an overreaction. What's the saying? "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem." I need to hold onto that thought. I'm probably still too Catholic deep down inside to kill myself anyway. The demons set in place by parents, teachers, and clergy when you're a defenseless child are powerful - overpowering - probably sinful, even, if preventing free thought in others is a sin. Somehow, I doubt if most churches would consider that a sin - well maybe the Unitarians.

I'm on my morning break, sitting at my desk. Light traffic in here so far. Too much time to think. Earlier, I found myself straightening the books in the psychology section - they didn't need straightening but there I was petting each one as if I expected it to begin purring.

The fog was thick as I drove through the valley into town this morning. As bad as I've ever seen it out there. At one point, it was as if the still distorted image from my dreams had been projected onto the curtain of fog ahead of me. I now believe that image is not one face, but two. That seemed to become clear on the fog. Neither was distinct enough to identify but two were definitely present. I suppose just that much progress is positive. Two heads leaning into each other like in some posed photograph. (Two heads are better than one??? Hopefully not worse!)

Last night the screams were so vivid - high pitched, soprano, I suppose. The background din also became clearer - or changed. It was a grating sound. Maybe metallic in nature - no, not really - I can't reconstruct it.

When I awakened, my heart was pounding and my upper arms were tensed like a thirteen-year-old searching the mirror for his still non-existent biceps. If that's the state in which my body tries to rest, I can't imagine how I remain awake all day. I must expend at least as much energy-depleting effort in my sleep as I do while awake. Sleep deprivation produces hallucinations. Of course, I'm not really experiencing sleep deprivation (sleep rejuvenates the mind). It's rest deprivation (rest rejuvenates the body). They are very different. My explanations to myself continue to amuse me.

My daybook reminded me that I'm to call the sheriff's office this afternoon about that first accident at the cliff below the camp ground - the one that Chance mentioned. The anticipation since then has revved me to an all-time high. I can feel and see the blood pumping through the vein in my wrist. My forehead is a wall of perspiration which is only momentarily slowed as it makes its way through my eyebrows to deliver its distinctive bite to my eyes.

My cat musings (an almost acceptable pun!) last evening prompted me to locate a book on the feline persuasion. It's here on my desk though I haven't perused it yet. I suppose it was brought to mind this morning. Cat had left early, being more persnickety (I just can't help myself!!) about breakfast than usual. As I was locking the door, making ready to leave, I heard the unmistakable screech of his seemingly obligatory cat and mouse game. Cat had the small creature in tow and was torturing it unmercifully on its way to becoming the main course of his temporarily delayed breakfast. I hoped he wasn't displacing the anger he felt toward me (for the unacceptable breakfast I served) onto his victim.

Cat and mouse game - what a horrific image that congers up. It gave me pause (sorry) however, to think of my situation in terms of the cat and mouse paradigm. Upon initial consideration, I assumed I would have been assigned the role of the mouse. As I contemplated it further, however, I felt myself

identifying with both characters - as if easing back and forth between them. Perhaps my relationship with BM is that of the mouse. Perhaps my former, hopefully fleeting, relationship with my victim was that of the cat. I shudder at the thought. Perhaps the screams I hear at night are the futile screeches of the helpless mouse. That makes no sense, though it was the perfect analogy in this tale.

With that clause, I have begun slipping further and further into the sea of puns - litter-ally. *The Sea of Puns* - a place, no doubt, where the precision of word meanings blurs into meaningless noise. The pun represents non-reality. When it's close enough to what's real it seems quaintly absurd. When it veers to far afield it reflects more on the absurdity of the punster than of the pun. Perhaps to keep word meanings clouded - multi-meaningful - just now is in some way self-protective for me. It has long lost its cleverness and moved within the bounds of irritation. (Irritation - that would be a rash-like malady of the auditory receptor. Hilarious to me but not even immediately caught by the typical listener, I imagine.) I must fight my way back (said the dysfunctional scales).

. . . Noon. I came home for lunch today - I never do that but here I am. I made the call to the sheriff's office. Due to a fourteen-car pileup in the fog on the highway south of town, their office has been too busy to carry out the search for me yet today. I'm to call later. She still seems to have every intention of looking for me. (Something about that phrase momentarily took my breath. Like a blow to the midsection. Sheriff looking for me? I don't know.) I'm glad I stuck to the back roads this morning - took forever but I did arrive in one piece. I could have been in the middle of that pileup. I feel badly for those who were involved. (See, I am a nice guy, damn it!!)

I wonder if the "damn it" was in reference to the absurdity of 'Nice Guy Me' having killed somebody or was in reference to the fact I wish I weren't a nice guy. Over thinking. Over thinking. I believe it was the first. I want to believe it was the first.

. . . I noticed the light blinking on my answering machine. I played it. BM is going techno - he, and it was definitely a man's voice, delivered his newest threat or demand, or whatever they

are. I copied it down word for word.

*“Number five and you’re still alive. Nobody’s more surprised than I. Don’t go down to Evansville. It would be your last trip anywhere, Peter. By the way, send the News Stand a hundred dollars to make up for the Playboy you stole when you were thirteen - Johnny.”*

It raises lots of questions - like why my pounding heart doesn’t just punch its way out through my chest. How did or does he know about my planned trip for Saturday? And that magazine?? It must be a boyhood friend or if not a friend then an acquaintance. It brings me back to Tommy. I’ll have to think about whom else - somebody who might have reason to hate my guts.

What did he mean - he’s surprised I’m still alive? Surprised I delivered the money he requested of me so I gained his promised reprieve? (It was hardly ever a promise.) Surprised he hasn’t yet driven me to suicide? Surprised he hasn’t had the guts to kill me yet?

It’s the first time he has referred to me outright as Peter and he did it in such a strange way. That sentence was constructed as though addressing me - just in reference to that sentence. What I’m getting at is that he didn’t begin with a greeting like, “Hello Peter.” He put it into the context of a sentence. ‘It would be your last trip anywhere, Peter.’ It may be meaningless but it certainly strikes me as being strange. Perhaps it’s just the writer in me.

The phone call ushers in a new era. I guess he could find my number in the phone book so that may not really be a question. No! He couldn’t. My phone’s unlisted to keep customers from calling me here after hours and on my days off. I’d better check the new book and make sure Ma Bell didn’t mess up and print it in error.

. . . It’s not in there. I was right about something. Wheel! (That was sarcasm. Not sure how you indicate sarcasm in written form. Sarcastic intent flows primarily from the tone of the oral delivery. Interesting. Later on that.)

I should recognize that voice. I’m sure I’ve heard it. If that’s true, BM is not some coincidence - opportunist - in my life - well, most likely not, at least. I suppose an acquaintance could

have stumbled on me doing whatever I did. More likely, if an acquaintance, it would have been somehow plotted. And, if plotted, it is probably presenting a lie. He couldn't have forced me to be a bad guy and then given me amnesia. Well. Could he? Perhaps the amnesia was an unplanned bonus.

How could a simple trip to Evansville be dangerous? It's less than fifty miles south on a relatively new highway. It passes through gently rolling terrain - a beautiful trip, actually.

Perhaps the question should be why BM would NOT want me to go to Evansville? Yes! That's more like it. So I can't discover something? Yes!! That's reasonable. But, was the purpose of the message just to scare me out of the trip or to threaten that he'd kill me if I went? Or, if I were to go, would something terminal just automatically happen to me? All of those, perhaps??

How many times must I have used the words "maybe" and "perhaps" in this journal? Hundreds, I'll bet. Maybe. Perhaps. That suggests lots of possibilities and few certainties. I wonder which of those terms is most forceful. Which one suggests that I believe the possibility referred to is more likely? Diversion. Perhaps, that discussion was just a diversion - well, maybe.

I must get back to the Shop. I'll not erase the machine so I'll be able listen again this evening and try to place the voice.

. . . Threats. Threats. Always threats but no action. No follow through. You'd think someone who wanted to make a believer out of me would do something to prove his intent, wouldn't you?

I'm back at the Shop. I just called directory assistance anonymously to see if they would give out my number. They wouldn't. She just said no such listing exists. Good going Ma B. For all your bad rep, at least you are taking good care of me. Ma B! MB - the reverse of BM. Oh my!

Time got away from me this noon and I was way late getting back here. I told Cindy to double her break time and I'd see she was paid for it. She wouldn't have been upset about my being late. Cindy just doesn't get upset about anything. Still, I felt I owed her. The register showed it had been really busy while I was away. She's gone now and nobody's come in since

she left.

I just read over the last paragraphs. I noticed that if I would tell threat to get to H out of there, it would become treat. A meaningless (and mostly humorless) observation although I'm sure a coach could turn it into some big motivational cliché to stir his ever-gullible boy's on toward victory.

Competition! I've always hated it because somebody always loses. Actually, everybody except one always loses. How can anybody in their right mind believe that training kids to be competitive can possibly raise mentally healthy human beings? Cooperation not competition is the key. In cooperation, everybody wins - everybody feels good about himself. Generation after generation we just keep doing it wrong. Look who's talking - the picture of mental health and parent par excellent. (Again, sarcasm, with no formal way of notation.)

If I were to become a parent I'd follow the teachings of *The Little People of the Ozarks*. I learned more about living the good life in those four little books than in all the rest of my reading combined.

I just can't stay focused, can I? It seems I've started asking questions here, as if someone else were looking over my shoulder or going to read and respond to this. Maybe a throwback to the journal I had to keep in 8th grade English. I loved that. I loved Miss Terry as well, of course. I suppose she figured that out as she read my torrid fantasies about redheaded, kind, soft and willingly affectionate, Miss X.

Hormones. Interesting things. They arrive - fully unpredicted - out of the blue, with the single, undeniable, purpose of narrowing a person's focus. They make guys - beginning at about thirteen, I suppose - attend mostly to just two things: having as much sexual contact as possible and hurting other boys. They seem to lead girls to become constantly catty (My apologies for using the term, Cat.), fully consumed by putting each other down behind their backs and snubbing - though teasing - their male age mates in favor of older, cute guys.

Do you sense just a little bitterness there? (Smile). I never thought of myself as bitter before. I wonder if that is a

more pervasive trait than I'm aware of. Nice and bitter. Humm?

. . . Three customers in a row. Don't they realize I have more important things to do right now? (That seems to be only partly tongue-in-cheek.) Perhaps sarcastic remarks could be enclosed by slash marks /Bla, bla, bla\. That would set them off with clear intent. The more slash marks the more sarcasm intended. ///Bla, bla, bla.\\\ I really like that. Suppose it could ever catch on? (There I go addressing somebody else, again, as if to justify the diversion.)

I'm seriously considering canceling my trip to Evansville. Although, if I would start out toward Cedar Point - north east of here - I might fool BM into thinking I was going somewhere else. Then I could circle south and eventually back west to Evansville. I'll consider it further this evening.

I have decided to stop by my insurance agent after work and see about filing a claim on the car.

. . . The meeting with Ed went surprisingly well.

"Pete, how you doing?"

"Pretty good - well in most ways I guess," I answered as I took a seat in front of his desk and began laying the pity-based groundwork.

"I've had a little medical problem - amnesia - short term I'm hoping. I got conked on the head in a car accident a week or so ago and I'm just beginning to remember about it all."

"I'm sorry. Sounds serious."

"I saw a neurologist and he pronounced me fit for the next sixty years - at ten bucks a year. It will just take time I guess."

"I've heard of things like that. Gradually it all comes back. One of my son's friends had it happen after a football injury. He's fine now. So, is this visit about the accident?"

He had not only taken the carrot but had cooked it up with pot roast and new potatoes.

"Yes. I'm just remembering about it, you know. It happened out at the Green County Campgrounds - well, just below. My car seems to have left the road and gone over the cliff - about a forty-foot drop. Luckily it didn't burn and I was very fortunate to get away with just a bump on the head."

"I'd say so! Totaled?"

I assumed he was referring to the car and not my head.

“Yes, in a big way.”

“Is it still there or has it been towed?”

“Still there. Like I said, I’ve just begun remembering.”

“Police report?”

“No. Like I said . . .”

Ed nodded and interrupted.

“No need. One car, I assume.”

“I assume. I just don’t remember.”

“Witnesses?”

“One. An old man who lives in the valley. Chance somebody. I can take you there.”

“I’ll need pictures and then I’ll arrange a tow. Should be worth a few bucks in salvage.”

“Maybe enough to pay for the tow,” I said, smiling.

He nodded and raised his eyebrows.

“That bad, huh? You were lucky then, weren’t you?”

“Very.”

“Is that Chance Gillstrap, you’re talking about?” he asked.

“How many Chance’s can there be in that area?” I answered, not sure what else to say.

“I insure his old truck. Known him for years. It’ll be good to see him again. Pretty much a hermit, the way I hear.”

“Seems to be. Yes,” I said, again not sure where to take the conversation. “Admirable for such an old man, I suppose.”

“Actually, I’m surprised he still has a license at his age. Let me take care of it. Chance can point me in the right direction. I’ll get back to you. That car was only about a year old, right?”

“Yes. Not quite, in fact. Hey, I don’t want to get Chance into any trouble in case he’s not a licensed driver.”

“I’ll not ask, if that’s your concern.”

“Well, yes, I suppose it was. Don’t want him losing his insurance.”

Ed nodded.

“Using a rental now, then, I suppose,” he continued as if that brief conversation had not taken place.

“Right.”

“Considering the circumstances - the memory thing - and all, we’ll pick up all the rental charges ‘til you get your settlement from us.”

. . . It had been a far easier and more useful meeting than I had envisioned. No police involvement. Rental fees paid. A settlement and a soon to be new car sitting in my garage slot. Yes, that had been a very good meeting. It did seem that he really didn’t want me with him when he went to examine the wreck. That’s probably just my paranoia.

Actually, I feel a little better, I think. I stopped for supper at Crazy Al’s Pizza Palace and I’ve been writing here in the booth waiting for the grease dripping, pepperoni laden, cholesterol-oozing, delight to arrive, and here it comes. More later at home.

. . . Strangest thing. I just tried to review the phone message and it has been erased. Does that mean BM has access to my apartment? Evidently. Gus? Jane? They are the only ones with keys. Maybe the owner has keys. I’ll get the locks changed tomorrow. In the meantime, while I’m here, I’ll make certain the slide locks and dead bolts are always in place.

I’m on the second floor. Could someone enter through the windows? Have to be very athletic, but the kitchen window might be reached with a long stretch from the rear deck at the top of the outside stairs. Athletic! One of the boys down the street!

. . . Checked the kitchen window. It was not locked, though the screen is in place and doesn’t seem to have been tampered with. (Just try to construct that sentence without a preposition at the end - ... and doesn’t seem to have with which been tampered???)

Gus has an extension ladder in the garage so I suppose anybody who knew that could have come in a window. I have never locked any of them - until a minute ago. They are all secure, now. I wonder if whomever it was, tampered with anything or took anything.

. . . A quick turn around the apartment didn’t suggest anything out of place or missing. My envelope of mad-money is still in place in my top dresser door. It’s never hidden. I’m

the only one here - well me and a lady friend from time to time. I removed a hundred-dollar bill from the drawer so I can send it to the news stand. I'm not going to identify myself - just a note printed from my computer that says, "For a past misdeed. Please accept my apology."

. . . I have it in an envelope and will drop it in the post box on the corner in the morning. Suppose BM works at the news stand? If so, I would expect him to have requested a good deal more than one hundred dollars. This whole threat thing just makes no sense. Originally, he wanted money but he's also always really seemed to want to kill me. Now, rather than giving him money, he's directing me to give money to other people. I suppose he could have followed me to Lancaster and taken the hundred-dollar bill out of the Poor Box as soon as I deposited it there. Maybe Tommy owed him the two thousand I gave him, so BM was able to collect his due. Maybe he does work at the newsstand. Total that up and he'll have taken in twenty-two hundred dollars in the past week or so. I could live on that!

. . . Just thought I heard a noise out on the back deck. I turned the outside light on but didn't see anybody - anything. Maybe a squirrel or cat. I probably should have looked before I lit it up out there.

I'm really jumpy now since the erasing. I opened my brief case to get out my gun before I went to the door just now. More problems. The gun had been emptied!! I'm quite sure I didn't empty it so who did? Where? When? It is now reloaded with bullets from the box in my dresser.

A .23 caliber bullet is so tiny and yet it can deprive a person of life in just a second. What a terrible thought. I have been thinking about where I would try to shoot someone if things should ever come to that. In the arm or hand if he was carrying something with which he could harm me. Otherwise probably his leg or foot. I will try to stay away from the abdomen where all the vital organs are.

Why am I so concerned about the welfare of the person who is putting me through this hell, especially if I've really already killed one person? Because I am a nice guy, you see! (Whoever YOU are??) I am a strange being, I am. I wonder where I got this addiction to being nice. Probably from my

parents. I don't remember any phrases about being nice from catechism. As I recall that was mostly filled with things I didn't dare do - very little about what I should do - other than go to church and tithe.

I remember when Father O'Malley was having classes with just us boys - six and seven year olds. During one session, he admonished us never to touch our penises. I asked how I was supposed to keep it clean and take a leak without touching it. I got sent home and was asked not to return for two weeks. If I had known that a few pointed questions about my penis would have got me out of catechism, I'd have certainly asked some far earlier. By the time I was allowed to go back to class my list of penis questions was long and well-rehearsed. (Private classes were not nearly as much fun as the group had been.)

Mom and Dad were nice folks. I remember people at church commenting about what a nice family we were. I suppose that over time, 'nice' just became part of my definition of myself. Pete's family was nice. Pete was nice. I can't remember ever feeling displeased that I am a nice person. It seems to have served me well. I am liked by most people. In fact, I can't think of anybody who doesn't like me - well, BM, I suppose that's become obvious. Even the girls who dumped me in high school and college always said I was a nice guy. I wonder why they dumped me, then. Maybe I was too nice - no, I'm sure my hormone driven hands wandered with the best of them. It seems to be a dead-end subject. I only hope I'm not too soon a dead-end subject??

I suppose I have to face it. I'm just not keeping it together very well. I imagine I should seek some professional help - counseling - therapy - whatever. There is no such animal as a psychologist or psychiatrist here in little Springfield. I'd probably rather go out of town anyway. Don't want people seeing me ducking in and out of a nut doctor's office. The closest ones are in Evansville and Cedar Point. I think my health insurance pays something for counseling. I'll look it up later. I remember Cindy saying her husband went to somebody down in Evansville for a while - a Dr. Mathias I believe, yes, Betty Mathias. I could ask Cindy about her but I don't want to bother Cindy with my problems - more likely, I don't want her to

know I'm experiencing any. Failure. Put down. Embarrassment.

I wonder if they've heard anything from Father O'Malley? I'll need to give St. Agnes a call in the morning. I haven't written on my book since I woke up from that week of nothingness. I'll try to get back to that this weekend. Maybe that will be good therapy for me. I've heard that writing is helpful that way. I should be in great shape then since I've been writing practically all of my life. (Perhaps that sheds some doubt on the veracity of the theory!)

Life! I wonder if I really did take someone's life. If BM has proof, like he says he does, then how can I get him to show it to me? He's never offered it. Of course, he hasn't had to increase the ante that way because I just keep doing whatever he asks. Maybe if I'd stop following his instructions he'd feel like he needed to provide proof and I'd know for sure - get some clue as to what happened. That might trigger some memory (or a bullet!!). Maybe that's what he's afraid of - that showing me or telling me anything more would help me remember and in remembering I would somehow cease being vulnerable to his scheme. He has no reason to provide me with any way of contacting him. It keeps him safe - insulated. He must know it's driving me mad - perhaps literally though I intended it as being figurative.

Of course, if he has no video because there was no dastardly deed, the whole relationship would evaporate. Here's a scenario that I hadn't thought of until just now; I actually did kill somebody and BM saw me do it but has no video - a more likely set of circumstances. Add to that, that he isn't aware of my amnesia and he would probably think there was no need to show me the video. I would know (remember) that he was right. Yes. That one makes more sense than the other possibilities.

I better get to bed. Lots of loose ends to take care of tomorrow.

## Chapter Eight: *Green Caps and Mickeys*

Again, I awoke to one of those, ‘I don’t know where I am experiences.’ It passed even before I opened my eyes, but for that split-second I had no idea where I was. The first time it occurred I referred to it as fascinating. This morning it was flat out terrifying.

I would have been better off leaving my eyes closed. They opened to see a ransacked apartment. Drawers pulled out and dumped. Cushions off the chair and couch in the living room. Drapes pulled from the windows. Silverware spread across the kitchen floor. Flour poured into the sink. Pictures slashed. Towels stuffed into the toilet and the shower curtain cut to shreds.

I’m hyperventilating. I’m sweating. I’m trembling. My mouth is desert-dry. I poured a glass of juice thinking that would help but I choked trying to drink it. He was here, working around me as I slept. I am still so tense. My fingers don’t want to write. I’ve checked the doors. The slide bolt on the back door was not in place. Could I have forgotten that last night? It seems so improbable but then I had a multitude of things on my mind. Perhaps I had locked it but BM was hiding in here - behind the couch, in a closet, concealed by the shower curtain in the bathroom. Then, once I was asleep he came out, tore up the place, unbolted the door and left. That’s a possibility, although it means he was willing to take the chance I might discover him beforehand. I don’t know.

The mess I can clean up. But how it could have happened all around me as I slept is unfathomable.

As is my usual practice, I had a glass of milk before I

went to bed. Perhaps it was drugged. That could be. BM could have drugged it when he came in to erase the tape. It might have clouded my thinking so I forgot to lock the door. There is no way BM could have counted on that, however. Access remains a question. He'd have to know my habits very well, however. Only a hand full of folks know about my milk before bedtime - and they are all women who have stayed the night. Which one of them might be in on this? The list goes back, what, a dozen years? I hadn't suspected any of them. However, it was a man's voice on the answering machine. This is getting me nowhere.

. . . I'm back. I began the cleanup in the bathroom, since that's the area I need to use first this morning. When I pulled back the shower curtain at the tub, there on the tile wall behind, written in lipstick, was another message - number six.

*"You are such a good torturee I may play with you a bit longer. Pay Pricilla \$500 for mental anguish over the water tower incident - today! Johnny"*

A picture. I should take a Polaroid of it in case I ever need proof.

. . . The picture is taken and came out crisp and clear. In fact, I took three. I'll hide them various places so BM can't find them - wallet, car, cabin. I also scraped some of the lipstick into an envelope. Maybe I can match it up with some color or brand and maybe that will help, somehow. The lipstick may add credence to the idea that a female is involved. I'm going to finish cleaning up the bathroom and get a shower, shave, and make ready for the day.

. . . Back. At least I'm clean and presentable. Other than that, I'm a frightful mess. I'm amazed at what seems to be the saddest aspect of all this. It's the cactus. I found it cut into a dozen little pieces, with its base pulled out of the soil. I complained at and about it every day and yet it was the only thing I've ever been able to grow. It was the one thing I had to nurture. I suppose I still have Cat but at best, he's only half mine and the bottom line is that a cat never really belongs to anybody. Cats just allow you the privilege of providing for them. But cactus needed me. It never complained that my ineptitude turned it yellow or that on occasion its tips began shriveling up

before I remembered it needed water. I stuck some pieces - those from the ends of its . . . branches? - see, I don't even know what to call his parts. Anyway, I stuck half a dozen of them back into the soil. I've heard or read that some varieties can be propagated that way. We'll see - I'll see. What's with this we stuff? I cried like a baby while I was repotting Cactus (now capitalized, I see.). Interesting, as if it has now been officially christened - named. Christened! I suppose that means it's officially a Christian Cactus - whether it wants to be or not. (Of course, that's no different from how most people are 'given' their religion, I guess.) More and more Cactus and I seem more alike. (I wonder if a sentence has ever before been written that contained three 'more's'. More than enough, I suppose. Ugh!)

I made a note on my 'To Buy' list to get a book about Cacti. Am I pathetic or what. My best friends in the whole World are a nameless Cat and an ever-anemic and now possibly mortally wounded, cactus. At least they will never be able to help incriminate me. (What a strange thought.)

That produced a chuckle - probably an over-done chuckle due to the tension. It seems bizarre that out of this entire journal - filled with odd thoughts - I would ferret out one phrase to call strange.

The bathroom is back in order. I'll need to purchase a new shower curtain. I went ahead and cleaned up the kitchen as well. Looked a mess but actually took only a few minutes to get back into shape. I'll need to get flour. Not thinking, rather than trying to save the flour, I ran water into the sink to wash it down the drain. There is now a slender string of paste making its way through the Springfield sewer system on its way to who knows where. (That has the makings of an interesting children's story. It could act in helpful ways to various sewer creatures and such along the way - filling cracks, mending whatever may be broken, providing a necklace for Ricky Rat to present to Rachel Rat, his girlfriend, and so on.) MORE DRATTE

. . . Now the whole apartment is back together. It was less time consuming than it at first appeared it would be. (Diagram that one!) The pictures are beyond repair but then I

selected them for color and texture rather than the paintings themselves so it's no big personal loss. I am reminded that Connie helped me pick them out and that Ellen Kay got bent out of shape because I hadn't asked for her help. Ellen Kay. Surely this couldn't be a holdover from something like that - could it?

I must make a list of TO DO's to for today.

1- I need to call about health insurance.

2- I need a cell phone. I will feel safer having a phone on my person at all times - especially out at the cabin.

3- Call St. Agnes about Father O.

4- Go out to the cabin and see if I can't get back into the swing of writing on my novel.

5- Locate Dr. Mathias. Maybe even make an appointment. Whether or not my insurance will pay, it is something I've decided I must do.

Okay, then. There is my list. Looks like I've decided against going to Evansville this weekend. I agree. (Now I'm agreeing with myself. Will I soon be disagreeing as well? It was just a figure of speech I suppose. I'm over thinking again.)

. . . Twelve thirty p.m. I'm out at the cabin. I brought boxes of ammunition for my guns - the hand gun and my rifle. As I brought all that armament into the cabin just now it underscored for me the seriousness with I'm taking the threat to my life. If I were innocent of the accusation, would I be this fearful? If given to act in a prudent manner, I believe so. I am a cautious man. I've always been that way. All of this suggests I'm just well prepared, no, carefully prepared for the possibility of dire eventualities. I wonder how that may be different from paranoia. Perhaps there is another continuum there. I choose to pass on it - at least for now.

I feel so tired - so worn - so old, I guess. Briefly, the other evening, I felt young and vital again. I turned on the TV and ran across the TV Land Awards for Classic Programs - or some such title. It went on and on but I got hooked because it was populated by the 'today version' - the really old version - of all those stars I see as young people in the reruns. It did make me think about the continuum of life from young to old. All those folks had made a contribution that just keeps living, generation after generation and in dozens of languages - *Get Smart, I Love*

*Lucy, Bewitched, The Brady Bunch, Love Boat, the Dick Vandyke show*, and on and on. I wonder what contribution I may make that will live on after I've left this Earth. (why I didn't just say, "...after I'm dead and dust," I'm not sure). Maybe my novel will do that. I really hope so. If not this one then the next or the next. I have a renewed spirit about writing after reading the really good pages I wrote most recently. There was one sad element about that TV program. At least I felt it was sad when I realized that the very best looking person on the stage turned out to be Gary Coleman! (Smile and chuckle!)

Back to serious things. I am now the proud owner of a cell phone. The salesman showed me how it can perform ten dozen amazing things. During the demonstration, he failed to show me how to just make and receive calls. I suppose that tells me how far behind the times I am. He just assumed I would know that. (I imagine even Gary Coleman can make cell calls!!!) I now know how and that is all that really matters. I feel safer and that is REALLY nice. I must not imply that safer is interchangeable with SAFE. It isn't.

I'm getting ahead. As I left the apartment I ran into Adam and Bruce - the boys from down the street. They were walking somewhere - banned from as well as required to wash the cars it would seem. They appeared pleased to see me or at least acted that way.

"Hey, Mr. Alexander!" Adam called, his hand raised in greeting.

"Well, if it isn't the two window peepers without wheels," I said.

They smiled, being good sports about the remark and all it symbolized.

"Yeah. We're trying to convince ourselves how healthful it is for us to walk and trot from place to place," Bruce came back, jogging in place for a moment as if to illustrate his newfound conviction.

"Haven't seen much of you guys the past few days."

"School, well except for yesterday - parent conferences."

So they had perhaps been home and just might have seen somebody lurking around my place - or may have been doing it themselves. I'll need to phrase this just right.

“Did you happen to see my screen guy working on my windows yesterday? He was supposed to come and fix some loose screening but darned if I can tell from looking out at them if it’s been taken care of.”

There, that was pretty good. They looked at each other and shook their heads. Adam provided the answer.

“Nobody there we saw but then we don’t make it a habit to sit and watch your place, you know. Your hair’s too short and chest too flat to make our list of top ten places to keep under surveillance.”

Bruce cracked up at his brother’s response and I must admit I also found it pretty clever. It got my chuckle as well.

“So, how are other things?” I said, hoping to change the subject without giving them time to suspect anything devious on my part.

“School’s good. Peeping’s good. Our allowances resumed today - we’re off to squander them. Life’s okay, you know?” Bruce said, having given my question far more thought than I would have predicted it would deserve.

“Got those new books devoured yet?” I asked.

Adam smiled the smile of all imps. “Brucie’s had a ball with the Ty Cobb book right off the bat, but I seem to just be jumping around in mine on Quantum Physics.”

Again, they roared. I joined in but only truly understood the joke about the baseball book. It gave me reason to look into the other one.

“Gotta go, Mr. A. Have a good one,” Adam said as they restarted their trek down the sidewalk. Not more than ten steps down the street they stopped and turned. Adam spoke again.

“Now that we think about it, we did see an older guy walking back and forth in front of your place about nine or so yesterday morning. He was a long way away, you know. I can’t tell you what he looked like. We didn’t see a truck parked around here though.”

Bruce broke in. “He was wearing a ball cap - an old green ball cap. That your guy?”

“It sure may have been. Thanks for remembering.”

They smiled as if pleased they had made a contribution. It probably wasn’t helpful but who knows. They sure seemed

like nice kids. Their parents must be really proud of them. Interesting. Proud, Love and Like, are three very different concepts when used in the context of family and children aren't they? (Who am I asking - 'aren't they'? Now stop that!!!)

You love your family members regardless of anything else. That's just given no matter what - how they turn out, what they do, how wonderful or rotten they are. The first time you hold your new baby you suddenly realize how much you love it. It's a sudden, but thoroughgoing realization that can never be shaken. (Of course, I have no personal way of knowing that, I guess.) You may not like the kind of person one of them is. You may not like his or her behavior or attitude or belief, but you still love him. You can be proud of them because they achieve something great or just because they try hard on their way to failing. How interesting. I wonder if most people think like that about those concepts. I wonder how I came about such definitions. I wonder why I felt the need to explore those here, now. I really did feel the need to get all that down. Raising kids just seems to be an overwhelming responsibility. I know my parents felt responsible for me until the day they died. Now I'm on my own, I guess. Perhaps that was the reason for this dissertation - that I am feeling alone in my desperation. No one left to love me. No one left to be proud of me or to like me because I grew into such a nice person.

Back to this day. After talking with the boys, I went to get the phone. It took longer to read and sign the contract - I believe they do get my first born - than it did for the guy to punch in a code that suddenly allowed me to call anybody, anywhere in the country, any time I want to. The only down side to the experience was that the salesperson seemed so depressed when I opted for the plain back model and not one with a colorful face plate - for sixty dollars more? No thanks! I have to assume that the commission on color was pretty high.

My first call, after I got out here, was to my HMO. The Health Maintenance part of that name seems an oxymoron since I found they won't pay for any preventative, before the fact checkups. Wait for the coronary rather than have an early cardiogram to prevent it. No wonder it costs an arm and a leg (and they undoubtedly use them for transplants!).

Today they made me a true believer in the third word - Organization. I was passed among nine departments and thirteen individuals before I finally came across somebody who could answer my question about Mental Health coverage on the plan provided by the Book Shop. Once someone found the right paragraph within the right document within the right file folder, the answers to my three questions were short, certain and reassuring.

“Yes. Mental health counseling from a licensed professional is covered. Yes. There is a \$750.00 pre-pay by the insured before the policy kicks in. Yes. I had already met that pre-pay so I would be covered up to \$999,250.00 over my life time.”

“Thank you.”

“Yes, Sir. We strive to have answers for you whenever you need them.”

The philosophy was nice but certainly overstated - exaggerated even - considering it had taken me seventy-three minutes to get to the one who had my answers. Interestingly, the employee who provided my answers probably has every reason to believe the slogan. She always has the answers for those transferred to her extension. And it can always be done with dispatch.

Oh, yes. I believe it is an Organization - a big, self-serving, bureaucratic, organization with all of the expected, overly specialized departments and employees. It was clearly designed to run smoothly from within, giving little thought to running smoothly for those whose hard-earned money they were receiving - I mean for those whom they were serving.

I run the bookshop in just the opposite way. The customer's comfort and ease of operating within my walls come first. If they have questions or require services that are difficult for me to fulfill it is never made obvious to them. I am the one who struggles, behind the scenes and silently, for their benefit - not the opposite as seems the case with all too many big businesses.

I'm sure they'd say they are just too big to function the way I do. I'd say to them, “Then stay small so the individual person's needs will always come first.” (End of sermon. I

wonder who is in my imaginary - or intended - congregation.)

I'm going down to look at the car one more time where it sits. Be back. (That sounds positive and hope filled.)

. . . Back. The car was gone - towed rather than evaporated I assume. Ed's efficient, I'll give him that. I wonder if they will examine it for mechanical failure. It could be hard to explain the hole in the gas tank. But then, that's not for me to explain, is it? It's for them. Finally, something in all of this that appears to be someone else's responsibility.

I had two, completely unrelated, thoughts as I made my way back up the hill. One was "Ka-ching!" I should soon be receiving my insurance settlement so I can get on with securing another vehicle. I liked the one I had. I'll probably just move up to this year's model.

The other thought was about the two thousand dollars gone from my bank account. I even looked around the cabin here when I returned - on top of the rafters, in the canisters, in and under the wood box - places like that. I also hid one of the Polaroid pictures. I'm not going to say where because I've begun wondering if BM may somehow be reading this journal. I keep it locked in my briefcase but he - or SHE - has proved that provides no security. It will go in my - woops! It will go elsewhere from now on.

Back to the missing money. It is such a round figure. Not the amount you would take out to pay a specific bill. I mean, how many things would come out to be a round \$2,000? Of course, I may have rounded it up so I would have some cash. I find that I have no, newly acquired, anything that would have cost nearly that much. What about several less expensive items? Still nothing. In fact, I find nothing new at all out here or in my apartment that would have been acquired within the last month - two months even. So the question remains and I don't have clue one.

What if that first blackmail note was not really the first one? What if I had received one or more before that? What if BM had already been paid that \$2,000 before my vacation? What if that has something or everything to do with my amnesia? WOW! I'm not even sure where to go with that possibility. I chose to write 'possibility' not 'probability'. I

suppose that's proper. It seems pretty farfetched, but then what of this doesn't?

Maybe I paid the blackmail money. Once delivered, BM then tried to kill me with the car accident. He tampered with the car or whatever. He had been aware of my amnesia before. That might account for the 'feeling blue thing' Cindy had mentioned. When I didn't die in the accident, he decided to milk me for whatever else he could get. (Milk me! Interesting in light of last night's possible Mickey in the milk.) Maybe he missed being able to torture me and that's why he's prolonging it all rather than getting on with a second attempt at killing me right away. Maybe! Perhaps! Possibly! Enough to drive a guy mad. //Ha! Ha!\ \ Yes, probably!!

The basic question remains. Why, or better yet, how did BM come to decide to black mail me or to want to kill me? If I only knew who BM was I might be able to answer that.

It brings me to another point. The man in the green ball cap. I saw a man in a green ball cap pass by the phone store this morning. He didn't look inside. I watched him. My mouth dried up. He didn't return and was nowhere to be seen when I left. It's probably more of a dead end than a useful piece of information. (Gee! I suddenly hate that saying!)

The note on the shower wall asked me to pay Pricilla today. Short of leaving it in her mailbox I couldn't really do that. It was too late for a mailed envelope to reach her today. I didn't want to risk her seeing me at her mailbox or front door. So, I put five, one hundred dollar bills into an envelope addressed to her and dropped it in a mail box near the phone store. It won't arrive until Monday but how can BM know, unless BM is Pricilla? Pricilla was gossip central all the while she manned the window at the water department. She heard everything there was to hear and religiously passed it on to all who would listen. She might have known lots of things about me and my family of which I would not be aware. In fact, she could know unsavory things about many people in this community. She could earn a pretty good retirement by blackmailing folks. But, I don't know that. Let me focus on what I do know and what I can find out. I can call St. Agnes.

. . . Apparently, there is an all-out search going on to

locate Father O'Malley. He's not been heard from. My stomach sank when I heard that. Clearly, I had been expecting - needing - better news. I felt surprised. I wouldn't have felt surprised if I was responsible for his disappearance, would I?

It leads me back to what motive I would have to kill the man. The only one that makes sense I've already stated - that I confessed something to him that I am not comfortable about so I made sure he couldn't tell, or maybe, so he wouldn't continue to think badly of me. That's a stretch, I suppose. Am I so vain and or insecure that I'd kill somebody rather than allow him to live being upset with me or knowing something bad - not nice - about me? My goodness, I hope not.

Move on. That is far too upsetting.

It crossed my mind on the way out here today that I had no headache or symptoms of a hangover this morning. I always envisioned the morning after a Mickey in the milk there would be some tell-tale mental symptom. I had none. Does that tell me I was probably not drugged or that there is some way to do it without leaving a trace?

Hey! What if Jack was in on it? I'd almost forgotten about him. What if my earlier thoughts about his having hypnotized me weren't pure malarkey? He could have left me with some post hypnotic suggestion to let him in or to remain asleep through the din or to forget this or that at his command. It might work in a story but probably not in real life. (No. I doubt if it would even work in a story.)

Something just came to me about access to my apartment. I thought of it when I heard Cat whining up on the roof, just now. He gets up there and then can't get down. Every time it happens he seems fully surprised. If cats would just learn how to back down trees and such, they'd never find themselves in that kind of seemingly impossible situation. I'll go help him in a minute. My thought was that BM just might be able to access my apartment from the attic. I've never looked up there, actually, but there is an access panel in my bathroom ceiling. I wonder if all the apartments have that or if mine, being on the end, is the only one. Even so, these are dropped tile ceilings. Anyone could push up a tile, shove the insulation batting out of the way and make their way to my ceiling. Maybe

not. The weight of an adult, even a small adult, would be more than the ceiling superstructure could support.

Now, a small child might be able to do that. The boy on the tricycle? He could have come over from another apartment, let himself down in my bathroom and gone to open the back door for an adult. *La La Land!* I've entered *La La Land*. Something else, quickly.

The lipstick will wait until tomorrow. I'll go to the drugstore out on the highway and cajole some clerk into trying to help me match it for my girlfriend's - no my wife's birthday present. That should work. (I'm so good at devising stories I should try my hand at writing.)

Speaking of writing, I need to break out the laptop and see how well I'm writing after all this time. I'll go help Cat and then give it a try.

## **Chapter Nine: *Life, Love and the Lunatic Within***

Time for supper. Cat's been salvaged. He protested the whole way down. Thank goodness for the well apportioned climbing tree there by the North eave. I suppose it would look bad to his ladies if he just admitted the need for assistance and succumbed in docility to the rescue. Fighting it just a little bit certainly would maintain his macho image - assuming he has one. For the time being he's stretched out on the other end of the table - resting quietly but once again eyeing the laptop. If I could just get the darn gadget to meow, I think old Cat would be encouraged to leap into action. (Humorous, ugly, image!)

I have written for several hours and it's going fairly well. I had to reread what I'd written during my blank period in order to maintain continuity. I'm writing very well. If not therapeutic, it at least takes my mind off things. It seems quite easy for me to get absorbed in the plot. It's now become a piece that's mostly writing itself. I've established the character's personalities earlier and now I've set them free to go at it within the bounds of the story line. It's amazing to see how they react and where they guide the plot. Originally, the outline called for the boy to be found soon, but I am now prompted to leave him lost a while longer and study how the parents cope with that situation. Explore how it affects their relationship.

I am doubly pathetic. My best friends are a Cat and a Cactus and I'm depending on the characters in my story to be my therapists. Coo Coo! Coo Coo!! Coo Coo!!!

Time for something to eat. There is real cat food for Cat this evening. Who knows what his reaction will be. I have the

makings for a ham salad sandwich, potato salad, and a dozen Ho Ho's for desert. If my unexplainable gas refrigerator has been doing its thing the past few days there should also be a selection of cold, soft drinks from which to choose. ('Unexplainable' in that I'm still quite convinced you can't possibly cool things by using a flame!! Faith. I just need a little more faith. That's undoubtedly an understatement.)

. . . The wind has come up. It moves a branch across the roof making a grating or scratching sound. It never used to bother me. Never used to, is the operative phrase. I'm of a mind to go up there with a saw and cut off the branch. Why, if I know it's just the branch - the same branch that's been doing that for six years - can it possibly frighten me so? There is no way into here from up there. I know. In the paranoia of my last visit to the cabin I searched the ceiling for possible hidden openings. Could one have been installed since then? It could have, of course, and the scraping noise could be used to cover the sounds of opening it up and repelling down into the cabin - shades of Mission Impossible! Geeze!!!

My food and drink were fine. Five more Diet Rites in the fridge cold as can be. (Regardless, I still don't think it's possible.) Makings for more sandwiches, too, if I get the urge. Cat is still working on his Chicken-Tuna Buffet. It seems acceptable to him tonight. No telling what gosh awful stuff he eats between my visits. I'm quite sure Chance doesn't buy cat food for him. He seems a bit lethargic (Cat, not Chance). Too many ladies in his life, perhaps (Cat, not Chance!).

I'm a bit lethargic, too. Wish I could blame it on too many ladies in my life. No ladies at all, I'm afraid. Cat is definitely a guy and I've started referring to Cactus as 'him'. Perhaps I should buy a flowering cactus so he can have a girlfriend. (Unfortunately, that was not intended to be humorous). Either I'm losing my identity as a human or I'm drawing the non-human into my realm. The latter, I suppose - I hope, if I had to choose. I'll inspect my body for prickly needles and/or fur before bed!! (That was intended to be humorous!)

It's twilight and suddenly cool. I'll lay a fire. I assume I will have to do without cat tonight. I already hear his harem calling although he's made no move toward the door. Play hard

to get. Atta boy!

. . . I spoke too soon. Cat Man has left the building. I stayed inside all afternoon. Usually I would have written out on the porch swing. I felt better being in here today; in here with my loaded rifle on the bed and my loaded pistol shadowing me as I move from place to place. Cat doesn't like the guns. He sniffs at them and backs off. He's smart. Smarter than I am, I suppose. It may be the oil. That's not pleasant to me either. Maybe he can smell things about a gun that I can't - gun powder, lead, some precursor of death, who knows.

I wonder how Cactus is doing.

I guess I better get back to my writing before I slip off the deep end (as the cliché goes.) For some reason, I am reminded that I once wrote a short story about the friendship between a Philodendron and an Iguana - *Philo and Iggy*. I wonder whatever happened to that. I couldn't sell it, that much I remember. It was quite humorous and philosophically pointed, I thought. All about the varying perspectives they held about the old man with whom they lived. Philo was impatient at his slowness - she being the fastest growing of the vine-like house plants - a vane vine one might say. Iggy appreciated the old boy's careful, plodding approach to things. Philo didn't find the old man's appreciation of his own foibles to her liking. She took offence at it in fact. One glance into his reflective pool and Iggy could fully appreciate his old friend's ability to laugh at himself. I'm not sure how it ended. I'm not sure why I'm relating it here. Perhaps I'm stuck somewhere between Philo's and Iggy's ways of viewing myself - vanity and realistic. I'll opt for Iggy's approach if I'm to have a choice. It's taken me thirty plus years to come to that realization, but it suddenly feels right. Whatever I am, I am. Right now, I just want to find out what it is that I am - nice guy or killer? Sane or insane? Improving or deteriorating?

Take Cat. He has no doubt about his place in the Universe. He is at its center. He has no reason not to like himself. It would be incomprehensible to Cat why anyone would not feel it a privilege to take good care of him. As a person, he would be a universally disliked and systematically shunned social misfit - probably multiply divorced. As a cat, he is perfect.

Cactus on the other hand always just seemed pleased to be alive. He put on no airs. He was what he was - a prickly, yellowing, fairly unattractive, sometimes withering, old desert plant, uprooted and set down in the often too dry living room of a fairly self-centered young man who frequently neglects his charge. Cactus was a resigned survivor, accepting whatever became his lot. That may actually be no healthier than Cat's approach.

I am what I am but if I want to change, I have both the right and skills to try. If I fail, I'm still okay. It wasn't the deep down good-me that failed. It was my skill. I feel good that I tried, not bad that I failed. I hope I really believe all this.

(If those revelations were prompted by the characters in my novel, they are pretty good therapists. I better get back to them and see what comes about. My relationship to them reminds me of the story of the man who saw a group of people rushing by him. He said to the person next to him, "I must hurry on now. I am their leader!")

In a minute. As I was fixing my sandwich a while ago, I was thinking about that first meeting with Adam and Bruce. I know I met their parents but for the life of me I can't recall their faces. Probably just too much going on in my head these days. It refuses to clutter itself with unnecessary data. Still, I feel quite uneasy about that. What if they are involved in all of this and I won't recognize them if they present some kind of threat to me. I wonder if he has a green ball cap.

. . . My phone just rang - my new phone - the one to which I have given no one the number. I'm sure somebody was on the other end but they did not speak or hang up. I hung up. They have not called back. Maybe it was a wrong number. Caller ID! How do I backtrack it to find out who was at the other end? I wish I had paid better attention to the sales guy. It doesn't even come with a manual. It comes with a URL to which you can go for a tutorial. I guess I'll need to do that tomorrow. It sure was - is - unnerving. My heart is pounding hard and fast.

Physiologically, it reminds me of the moments leading up to my first real kiss when I was fourteen. I was sure she would let me kiss her - I mean the guys didn't call her "Frenchie" for no reason. I had practiced into the open end of my flattened fist

all afternoon. I hoped my tongue wasn't worn out. We sat there in the dark on her back porch. Her parents weren't home. My arm had been around her for some time and she had laid her head against my shoulder as we talked - well, she talked mostly. I tried to keep my repetitive gasping disguised as throat clearing. I wondered if she could feel my heart thumping. I was sure she could. She kept running her hand across my T-shirt covered chest. It was the first time I realized there was a direct and immediate connection between my chest and my crotch.

I thought my heart would burst then, and I feel the same way now. Just as terrified in anticipation of the unknown. Back then I sought the experience. Now, I want to avoid whatever it may be. (Yes, we eventually kissed quite a bit that evening. No, my tongue did not wear out. Yes, my heart still pumps fast as I recall that evening. No, I can't remember her real name. Yes, I'm confused as to why I am offering this epilog.)

I can't seem to get back to the book. I have so many wonders that keep popping in and out of my head. I keep coming back to my boss, J. A. That's interesting. I seldom really think of him as being my boss. He lets me run things my way. I'm the boss. I tell him how I'm going to do things. Still, he rakes in the profit. There is something strangely uncomfortable about J. A. since I returned from my black out. I can't put my finger on it. I haven't seen him or even spoke with him. That's strange. Like the boy's parents, now I can't conger up an image of his face. I can't make out the faces that are present in my dreams and I can't recall certain faces in my awake. Was it J. A. that I did in? I believe that's the first time have considered that. With him gone what advantages would I have? I could buy this place and take the profit for myself. I wonder if I'm in his will. If I ever knew I don't remember now. I'll call him tomorrow and make sure he's okay - or missing. Just knowing either way should help!?

I assume I am awake. I remember wondering about that as a little boy - how I could be sure which was real - dreams or wakefulness. Dad said to pinch myself and if it hurt I was awake. That made little sense because I have felt pain in my dreams. If I'd pinch myself in a dream I'm quite sure it would

appear to me to hurt. I know he was trying to help but it made no sense. Much of what adults said made little sense. I always figured that when I grew up I would be able to look back at those seemingly absurd things and finally understand them - see the hidden truth in them. I trusted that it was there. No such luck - not so far at least. Perhaps I'm not yet grown up.

There is an interesting tack to take. Maybe all of this is the dream of a seven-year-old looking uneasily into his own future. I may be trying to comprehend things about life that are still out of reach for a boy my age - logically and emotionally. Shudder!! Could I think that, though, if I were still a child?

Perhaps I should spend time thinking about my childhood. For some reason, I really don't want to do that. I wonder why. I've always looked back on it in a positive way. "In a positive way." That's coldly analytical, isn't it? I should have said, warmly, or fondly, or joyfully. It should have dredged up images of running into my parents' open arms and hearing how lovable and precious I was. It didn't do any of those things.

The best I can do is to recall a fairly emotionless chronicle of events. I remember living in Lancaster and starting school there. I remember going to church and playing ball. I remember the little pest from the neighborhood who insisted on following me everywhere. I hated that but I remember mom saying I had to be nice to him. I remember playing doctor and being amazed as I discovered all the things girls didn't have. I remember my first bike; an old, once red, wagon; the tire swing behind my house; my room with bunk beds and Superman sheets and pillowcase. I remember moving to Springfield. There is some emotion tied to that. A deep sadness. I probably didn't like being uprooted from everything I had known. That's reasonable. I remember entering school here - third grade. Interesting. It's as if that move is a dividing line of some kind between a former happy, carefree life and a more subdued - if not sadder - life afterwards. Perhaps the stresses of making new friends and such caused all that. I don't recall any specifics, like getting beat up or hating a teacher or not having friends. Mom seemed sad. I remember that. Maybe my parents were going through a difficult period. I have no recollection as to why we moved. Father O'Malley might know.

I'll remember to ask him. Ouch! Well, I'll ask him if he's still available to ask, if I didn't send him to his premature reward. Why do I have so much difficulty just saying it - "If I killed him."

No emotion associated with that concept today. Strange. Interesting. Wonder producing. I feel concern for his well-being but no anxiety about my possible connection to it. That seems positive - or insanely detached.

If not O'Malley, then who? Who did I kill? Did I Kill? It sure seems like I did. It's the first time that idea has begun to feel right, legitimate, real. No physiological reaction to that revelation. No pounding heart. No sweating palms or brow. No nervous drumming of the table. Acceptance. Odd. It's as if the anxiety about it was not associated with the deed but with my inability, my unwillingness, to acknowledge it.

I hope this is a dream. I hope I do awaken into the body and life of a little boy - a little boy with a mom and dad who will know just how to make all of this right - who will be able to help me feel safe and good and 'acceptable'. I wanted to make that 'lovable' but it would not be written.

Do I work so hard at being nice because deep down inside I believe I am not lovable? Do I keep having to prove it or try to prove it to others even though I can't believe it myself? Complicated. Unnerving. Lunaticical (not a word, I know, but suddenly imbued with precise meaning for me!).

Back to my life - Grade school was okay. An average athlete - nothing special. Played trumpet - 2nd chair. Won a county-wide essay contest in 8th grade - can't remember the subject.

I had a small group of good friends in high school. I made very good grades. Started working at the bookshop after school and summers. Had a date most every weekend. Began having sex way too early. As a result, girls became objects of pleasure rather than sources of great relationships. I suppose I overcame that during college. Had several stable, love-like relationships there. Major in English. Minors in psychology and business. Worked to help support myself the whole tour.

An interesting fleeting thought - that I was engaged. Probably a wish-fulfillment fantasy. I'm quite sure I was never engaged. There sure was something wonderful about that brief

thought. Really . . . wonderful - can't find a more appropriate word though I'm sure there is one.

I got my teaching credentials and taught English up in Cedar Point for seven years before getting fed up with the educational process and accepted the position at the bookstore.

That engagement thing bugs me. Now I'm fanaticizing about living with a girl - a woman - while I was in college. Its substance is gone as rapidly as it came.

I'm flitting around. My memory of high school represents a pretty smooth period in my life. Memories seem quite clear.

When I was fifteen, Dad died in an accident on an army base. He was in the National Guard and doing his summer two-week stint at the time. I remember being devastated but feeling I didn't dare show it. I had to become the man in the house. There had been a good insurance policy but Mom went to work at a dentist's office. She died last year of cancer.

It's interesting how, at this moment, I don't feel alone when clearly I am. Most of my adult friends are up in Cedar Point. I see them once a month or so. All fellas. Interesting! Few left over from high school. Most are still teaching. Marcus teaches biology and coaches the swim team. John teaches math. He lost his wife to pneumonia a few months ago, and I haven't been very good about being there for him, I'm afraid. I hear he went off the deep end (that's the technical, psychological term!) and has taken the rest of the school year off to get himself back together. I should make a point to at least call him. Bill teaches shop and history. He's probably my best friend. They are all married - well, John was. I suppose their wives are my friends too. I enjoy being with them as couples - them and me with a date. (Odd sensation.)

I should look up Carolyn. I've dated her often in the past few months. Not sure why I think I should do that (look her up). She's just about the most comfortable of the women I know, I guess. Perhaps I'm seeking comfortable. She is someone I probably could share all of this with. She gives good counsel. I just would never want to trouble her with my situation. If I have done some terrible deed, I certainly would not want to involve her - as an eventual witness against me.

It certainly sounds as though I believe I did something horrendous. Why can't I remember? Maybe hypnosis would help. I really must make an appointment with Dr. Mathias. I see lots of signs that I'm losing it. The faces that I can't see - remember. The anxiety and outright fear. The paranoia-like mistrust. Life is not good. I have to get it all sorted out and plainly I cannot accomplish that by myself.

So, again, who could I have killed? Father O'Malley? J. A.? Some total stranger in an accident up on the road above the cliff. I'm certain my mother died of cancer but something is making me question that. It feels like I am somehow responsible for her slow death. "Slow death." An interesting phrase. As I recall she found out about it in June and died in mid-July. That would not be a slow death - really, would it? (Again, to whom am I addressing questions?)

I can't get Carolyn out of my mind. Her beautiful, black hair - her wonderful, easy smile - her quiet manner in both voice and movement. We talk so effortlessly and about anything. Sex is all quite secondary in our relationship. It is remarkable but is not the basis of our relationship. That may be a first for me. It's . . . how should I describe it . . . altruistic sex! (I may have just coined a phrase there, but it is accurate.) We each want to make it a wonderful, unhurried, genuinely affectionate, experience for the other. We know each other's needs and desires and feel privileged to fulfill them. Why haven't I asked her to marry me? I must be insane! (Not the best choice of word at this moment in my life! I hope it is not prophetic!)

It's times like these that I really miss never having had a sister or brother. I always envisioned that kind of relationship as a helpful, supportive one. I sure need help and support. I guess I'm going to have to buy it from a therapist because I'm unwilling to go to the few friends I have. Being so recalcitrantly nice and considerate can certainly be a curse!

I wonder what tomorrow will bring. I am expecting another threatening note - well, or message, I suppose. I should get caller ID on my home phone. Never saw the need for it before. BM will probably know I have it even before it's activated. How does he know so much so soon? I am missing somebody who is in my life and who has easy and ready access

to my activities. That may lead me back to Gus. Maybe he's not the dull-witted, old, slob I have always made him out to be. Maybe he's taken his time to bug my place, cameras even. Maybe he's not doing it just to me but to the others as well.

There is an interesting idea. What if he's blackmailing all five of us? But so far he has had no way to profit from any of the actions he has required of me. Unless Tommy is in his employ. Tommy IS pretty slow and could be easily hoodwinked, I suppose.

No. It has to be somebody who is regularly close to me and who has access to personal things - personal data. Cindy! Surely not Cindy, although day in and day out she is the one who is closest to me. We talk. We share. Cindy??

. . . The phone just rang again. I let it ring eight times, thinking I wouldn't answer it. Eventually I did. It was no wrong number. The message was clear and to the point.

*"You have ten thousand dollars in bonds. Cash them Monday. Put the cash in a bag - hundreds. Leave it on the sofa in your apartment and stay away - way away - all day. Snoop around and you're dead, Johnny."*

I'm sure I know that voice! I got so upset that I forgot to pay close attention. It's male, baritone, deliberate, mid-western in speech pattern, cool and business like. Age? I can't tell. Adult but that's all I can say. I hope this gadget keeps a record of calls so I can someday trace them. Probably a pay phone somewhere. If he's this good, this careful, he wouldn't make such a stupid mistake as to use a phone that could be traced to him.

I've heard there are voice disguiser mechanisms you can put on a phone that changes the sound from male to female or female to male. It could be a female, then. See, even my certainties are no longer certainties. Do the phone companies give out cell phone numbers? I don't think so. They aren't listed in the phone books. Maybe for a fee they can be listed. I paid no such fee.

In this last message, he confirmed that he has access to my apartment. He said nothing about leaving a door unlocked for him. He is getting pretty bold, I'd say. What if I had the police or a private eye watching my apartment? That's an idea. Hire

a private detective. I'm not even sure if there is one in Springfield. I will go home first thing in the morning and look into that. Maybe between a private eye and a therapist I can get a handle on this.

BM is clearly not dumb. Would he not know that I could hire somebody to watch my place? Of course, he would. But, that would only be from the outside. What if he has access from the inside - that attic thing!!! Gus or one of the two other second floor residents! In the morning I will climb up and see what I can discover above that attic access panel in my bathroom.

I should probably go to bed. It's clear I won't get anything more written on my book. I've raised so many troubling possibilities that my mind is not going to easily turn off so sleep can come. I need to get back to town early - lots of things to look into there. Tomorrow is Sunday, isn't it? Yes.

I'll give BM one thing. He's been very methodical in building up to this point. First, he opened the dual ideas of blackmail and killing me. Then he systematically led me to admit and accept guilt over past misdeeds getting me into the giving habit to earn absolution and or forgiveness. By pointing out my misdeeds he solidified (or tried to) the idea that I am so bad that death by vigilante is a reasonable alternative. Finally, the big demand for money and the convincing implication that I will be killed if anything at all goes wrong with the delivery. Why would he have said earlier that I was too poor to blackmail if he knew about the bonds? Part of his systematic plan, perhaps. New information??

I'm about at the point of saying I won't pay up. This could go on forever. Once my savings are gone the demand could become a substantial part of my pay check every week - for the rest of my life. It has to stop somewhere.

Maybe if I take a stand now, I will force him out into the open - make him show himself or force him to do something that will help me figure out who he is. Maybe I should get the police involved. Would it be better to go to prison at the hands of justice or die at the hands of evil? (That's probably overstated in both dimensions. That 'writer thing' again.)

It's interesting. I have no clear answer to that. If life were

of utmost importance to me my response should be automatic. If I truly believe I am blameless in all this, I should trust in the justice system. If I were terribly depressed I could understand welcoming death. It seems a good sign, actually, that I am not that depressed.

What am I feeling? Fear. As I recall, truly depressed people don't feel fear - they feel nothing - or at least that's one goal of depression - to reduce feelings. Anxiety. Again, the opposite of depression. Puzzlement and the deep desire to solve it. Certainly not the goal of a depressed person in pursuit of detachment. My mind has remained active. My thoughts, if not always reflecting logic, continue to search - to ferret out the real and meaningful from the paranoid and unsound.

So, I am an anxiety racked, seeker of the truth about myself, who vacillates between believing in my goodness and in my likely potential for turpitude. An interesting mental exercise but it leads me no closer to an answer as to whether I should pay or hold out. Perhaps a note in the sack saying it will take more time to get the bonds cashed. That might buy me some time. I could say the bank will not be able to handle all the details until Wednesday or Thursday. My intent to pay would still seem clear and the bank would become the stumbling block.

I have some over the counter 'go to sleep' pills. I think I better take them tonight. I'll lock the doors, windows, and shutters and turn off my phone. I'll put my pistol under my pillow and the rifle beside me on the bed. I'll sleep on my back.

Wait a minute! BM's not going to harm me tonight - or tomorrow. He can't get his hands on that ten thousand dollars unless I'm alive. I can relax. Unless he set this whole thing up just to throw me off guard. That's a bit paranoid, I imagine. A BIT, HELL!

It has become so difficult to determine when I slip across the line from prudent carefulness and into delusional paranoia.

This whole terrible experience is enough to drive one to religion. (That unexpected thought-path produced immediate and unbridled laughter. It was good to laugh in a genuine - rather than nervous - manner.) There is so much truth framed within that idea that it verges on an exceptional insight. So

many people either enter into, or cling to, religion for the purpose of reducing their fears and providing fully illogical answers to the discomfiting unanswerables in life. I've always been able to accept that some things are just unanswerable in terms of our present state of knowledge and have not felt the need to invent another, fantasy-realm, or imaginary-power to provide those answers. Revisiting the history books makes it clear to me that most of the premises upon which religion was originally based have been shown to have reasonable - provable - answers right here in the real world in which I live. So, I have no reason to doubt that the few remaining questions that religion clings to as the basis for its existence, will not eventually also be answered in terms of the natural processes of the universe. They may not come within my lifetime, but that is irrelevant.

I'm glad I had those thoughts this evening. I'll forgo the pills. I'm ready for sleep.

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## Chapter Ten: *Philosophic Musings (Diversions?)*

Cat's been fed and is already sleeping his day away on the front steps. I'm about ready to leave for town. It was a good night's sleep - well, relatively speaking. I feel more rested than usual. I slept longer than I intended but take that as a good sign. My dreams were more vivid. Those two faces are toying with me now - fading in and out. Last night it was as if for just a millisecond they became completely clear but it wasn't long enough to get a handle on them - to place them or even be able to say, "Yes, I do recognize them," or "No, I don't recognize them." That seems like progress to me, however. I am now assuming that one day soon (well, one night soon) they will be clear. My fear is no longer that I will not recognize them but that I will. MY! I seem bound and determined not to let things (me?) get better.

What if one or both is the face of the person I killed? Will my memory of the event rush back and fill the void? If it does, will my clearly overtaxed mental system be able to handle that? Could too much, too soon, propel me into some state of no return? A lot of good that great night's sleep did me. I'm sitting here shaking like a leaf. (A strange idiom.)

Another set of strange - diversionary, perhaps - thoughts. I used the expression, "bound and determined." I wonder where that came from. My first thought was that of an eager, young, boxer in the old, no gloves, days where bare knuckles were bound with rags and tape. My second was that of an 1880's young lady, cinching up her girdle in preparation for her pursuit of an eligible young man at the Cotillion.

Then there was "overtaxed mental system." Once a tax

is paid you never get it back. Does that suggest that what has been required of my mind through all of this has taken a toll that can never be recouped? "Taken a toll." I don't even have a good vision of where that may have come from - paid to cross a covered bridge, perhaps. "Shaking like a leaf," I suppose, may be reasonable - a leaf fluttering in the breeze as it clings to the twig from which it was given life. If it is shaking out of fear, is that the fear that it may be soon separated from all that is familiar and safe or that it may never get away to establish its own, independent life elsewhere. If the latter, big surprise, Leaf!!! Once the cord is cut, there is no retreat to the former comfort and safety you once knew and depended on.

My, that's pessimistic. Another interesting continuum - from despair at one end to Pollyanna at the other.

Despair > Pessimistic > Realistic > Optimistic > Pollyanna

The additional interesting aspect of that is to determine at what point on the scale one feels the most comfortable. With despair, there is no hope so possibilities do not need to be considered. With pessimism, you keep yourself protected from being suckered into something that may hurt you but then you also forfeit the possibility of experiencing something really wonder-filled. Realistic probably avoids emotions entirely. Optimism provides a positive feeling about life in general but leaves one vulnerable to hurt - thinking well of that which is potentially harmful. The Pollyanna is as 'sick' as despair - refusing to see any possible down side to anything and therefore leaving oneself recklessly vulnerable to all that is potentially harmful in the world.

I suppose I've lived most of my life somewhere between realist and optimist. Lately I find myself vacillating between mild despair and pessimism. Why do I feel this need to get everything into a paradigm of some kind - onto a scale or into some organized structure?

I should be on my way but my urge to write these things seems all-consuming. I'll sit here on the porch swing for just a bit longer. As I was lying in bed last night I began thinking about faith - religious faith mostly, I suppose (and my possible lack

thereof). To have religious faith one must convince himself to believe - without question - in something for which there can be no proof in a logical or scientific sense (in any other context that kind of thought process would define insanity.). The proof offered for the supernatural basis of religion usually goes something like this. "See this thing that happened (tears appearing to flow from the eye of a religious stature, a child at death's door suddenly becomes well, a person is mysteriously snatched from harm's way). There is only one explanation - divine intervention."

It could just as well go like this. "See this thing that happened. We don't yet understand how it may have come about." Period. Stop there.

Another piece of proof often offered for the existence of some supernatural force is beauty - as if beauty is an innate given within the human psyche. It isn't, of course. It is strictly a culture-dependent, learned response. We learn what our culture believes is beautiful - the desert (if a wandering Arab), the ice expanses (if a Laplander), the rainforest (if, a child of the Amazon basin), the Ozark Mountains (if raised in Mountain Home, Arkansas), twelve inch earlobes or a lower lip that has been teased into protruding five inches beyond the upper lip (if raised in central Africa), and on and on down a long list. To then turn around and say, "How could anyone see this beauty and not believe in a divine presence," is to use circular thinking - proving your point by the mere fact that point exists. (It's interesting to note that babies typically cry when first shown brightly colored 'beautiful' flowers - they have to be taught that such things are beautiful.)

People who need such a faith seem to be incapable of dealing with the normal unanswerables in life. At least that's the way I see it. So, they invent (or buy into) a fantasy realm which has no basis in the real world or any of its established principles, laws or logical processes and then proceed to use that unfounded fantasy as the basis for explaining things that happen in both realms. In that sense, religion today is not really any different from when it was believed that the World was held in place on the shoulders of Atlas, or that a god in a chariot raced across the sky every day pulling the sun behind him.

Those were unanswerables back then and those who could not be comfortable without an answer invented the gods and all that was necessary to provide explanations. About the only thing that is really left for religion to explain (invent) these days is life after physical death. It's also used as a source of mystical powers that can be guided or directed through the supplication of the faithful to institute miracles - that is, to produce outcomes or processes that would not be expected (explainable) on the basis of current knowledge.

Mortality seems to be terrifying to most people. I think that's strange. When something becomes that uncomfortable I suppose I can understand why they would do what they could to build some comforting belief system - one that is based on (requires) a supernatural (non-physical World) presence. Proof for the existence of a supernatural being or realm has frequently been based on the fact that all cultures - however remote or primitive - have developed such a religious bent. That seems to be sufficient proof that God has spoken to them. Could it not just as easily - and more realistically - be said that the universal invention of religion merely proves that human beings share a need for certainty and answers, and that when they cannot be found in the known world, we use our special creative powers to conjure up some 'out of this world' explanation. That second approach makes more sense to me. It may not be accurate but it just makes a whole lot more sense to me because it's based on things I can demonstrate about the known World and the verifiable psychology of the human species.

Does that mean a non-religious person - that is one who does not believe in some supernatural realm - cannot be a good person and a positive force in the world? Many 'religious' people seem to firmly believe such a person cannot be 'good'. I can't imagine how the concept came about. Well, perhaps I can. If one depends on his belief in his religion to prove his own positive worth, and if he allows himself to see that some of those who don't share that belief are equally or superiorly good, it brings numerous aspects of his religious paradigm into question. I'm a good person. I regularly give large sums to charities and I volunteer every week at the Boys' and Girls' Club. I march for peace and vote for improved educational and

health care for kids and the elderly. I recycle and regularly help pay to preserve the rainforests and wetlands so my planet will remain healthy. Every day I do what I can to brighten and improve the lives of those with whom I come in contact. When I do something wrong, I am the one who has to live with it. I can't go ask some supernatural power to forgive me in order to relieve myself of responsibility. I can't depend on some supernatural force to take care of the poor and the homeless and the sick and the disturbed, so I have to help do that. I can never relinquish my responsibility by just saying, "It's in the hands of the Lord," or "It's God's will."

Perhaps my focus is just different from most religious folks. My goal is to improve the human condition through love, so people everywhere can live in peace and safety, and will have the opportunity to become all they have the resources to become. Although some religious people also seek and work toward those goals, their bottom line always seems to be doing those things that will get them into 'heaven' (by whatever name). They are not, you see, altruistic in any true sense of the word. They are actually just self-centered folks looking out for number one (in the I - o - n - g run).

My! I didn't see all that coming. I'm glad I got it down in black and white though. Someday I'll be able to go over it and determine if it still holds any truth for me. Now I really must get to town.

. . . I was thinking on my drive back into Springfield that most people who might read what I wrote this morning would have to deny it outright, because to even let themselves consider it would be too uncomfortable. To allow themselves to search it for possible truth would be to admit their own belief might not be the fully accurate belief. So, they would approach it with a closed mind from the git-go. If they read on, their overriding purpose would not be to consider it but to debunk it - to prove it wrong. They can't allow themselves to seek any greater truth because they have cloistered themselves within some pre-defined concept of what truth has to be - some fantasy-based concept, in fact.

People who believe they know THE TRUTH scare me out my gourd. They seem to believe IT gives them the right to

force their belief onto others or to reduce “our” rights so “theirs” can become paramount. They truly scare me - they have no respect for my rights. In fact, I have no right if it represents a belief that is contrary to their own. They represent the epitome of irresponsible egotism.

Am I, in essence, just saying that my version of the truth is better than theirs? I don't think I am. I give them the full range of rights to hold and practice their beliefs so long as they don't impinge upon mine and my rights and are not harmful to any of those who don't share their belief.

Casual acquaintances are typically surprised and puzzled when they hear what books I'm reading at any given moment. They say, “You believe in that kind of stuff?” (Witchcraft, Catholicism, Mysticism, Confucianism, Shinto, survivalism, prejudice spewing pieces, Rightwing Christianity, North Korean brainwashing techniques, etc) “I'd have thought you'd read bla, bla, and bla,” (whatever philosophic orientation they assume I may have, which, interestingly, is usually assumed to be whatever they profess to believe.) (I'm seen to be a good guy; therefore, I have to be one of them.)

I tell them this. “I seldom read material that confirms what I already believe. I read everything that contradicts it, so I can continually examine my beliefs and modify them - update them - when I discover additional things that make sense to me.”

They typically shake their heads. I guess most folks only read that which reinforces what they already believe. I interpret that to mean they continually need reassurance that they are right (and, perhaps, that the rest of us are wrong. If one needs that kind of reassurance he is, in reality, admitting his uncertainty, I suppose.). I treasure my unique human capacity to seek the truth. Sadly, I am coming to believe, most people don't. It is one of the half dozen skills that sets us apart from all beings in the known universe and most people choose to just ignore it - no, worse than that, to disallow it for fear they might learn something that would rock their philosophic boat.

Do I seem bitter? I suppose I am. I treasure the fleeting opportunity I have to be this Human Being that I am. There has never been and will never again be another being just like me.

Never! Never! That is SO special. We Humans have a large and varied menu of paths - traits - that we can chose to develop and utilize. Some, like the destructive traits, (blame, rage, hate, revenge) are counterproductive for improving the human condition so they must be played down. We aren't bad because we have them but we are only truly Human when we find more positive ways to approach life - to keep them from being our habitual approach. My hunch is that our basic aggressive-destroying traits are left over as neurological traces from the evolutionary process. They were once necessary for the survival of the species. Now, at this human level, they should no longer be necessary.

It seems to me that Humans are the only known species that can Love in the fullest, most rounded-out, sense of the concept. Living by the old, left-over, destructive, strictly self-protective traits WILL eventually work to destroy the Human Species (and perhaps the planet). We must, therefore, foster and invoke the humanity-unique, positive, love and compassion-based traits we also possess. Children need to hear they are wonderful, precious, loveable, caring beings so they will come to be proud of those traits and eventually approach life accordingly. They must not learn, early on, that they are bad, unworthy, bothersome, unimportant, beings, or they WILL, I believe, approach our world in those always destructive ways. My years as a teacher saw it happening every single day. There are so many unfortunate children who are hooked into debilitating and sorrowful life paths, which the ignorant or unthinking adults around them predestined them to follow.

I'm sure little of this is original with me. I read a lot. I absorb a lot and don't try to footnote it all in my memory. Improving the Human condition through love is the baseline upon which I have founded my adult life. I guess what I'm leading up to with all of this is that the idea of my having killed a fellow human being is so foreign to everything I believe, I am quite sure that if it happened, it was not done out of malice or hate. That leaves accidental death. It leaves - again, probably accidental - the possibility I killed someone as I was defending myself or someone else against a life-threatening

attack. Those alternatives I can live with. If I exhibited negligence in the accident scenario, however, I will be devastated. Still, it should be better just to know. Shouldn't it? It seems I'm not a very effective cheerleader for my own cause.

. . . Just investigated the attic situation. I looked around it from the vantage point of the opening in my bathroom ceiling. With my flashlight, I could see what I needed to see. There is solid sheet insulation laid across and nailed to the joists, with blown insulation about ten inches deep on top of that. There is a firewall which completely separates the attic over my apartment from the next one to the North. I then raised one of the dropped ceiling tiles back down in the living room. It is about ten inches from the joists above. There is no way anyone could gain access to the attic over my place through another apartment. That leaves me having to believe BW has a key or access to one - or, can pick locks.

. . . There was just a fender bender on the street outside. No one seemed to have gotten hurt. Guess who showed up to watch? The man in the green cap! He came from the west and was walking on the sidewalk on the other side of the street. I hurried down stairs to get a better look at him but by the time I got around the building he was gone. I suppose I was moving too cautiously and therefore too slowly. (Can one hurry, cautiously?)

Gus stuck his head out the door to see what was going on. I stopped and chatted with him for a minute. I noticed that he had a new, huge screen TV - sure it carried a several thousand-dollar price tag. It made me suspicious all over again. Two thousand to Tommy and now a new TV for a guy perennially strapped for money. I got no nervous vibes from him, though. He's just not sharp enough to be pulling this off. His ex-wife might be, however. I guess I should make it a point to talk with Tommy.

I know! He's always liked sports. I'll take him the new all-time baseball stat book (or whatever it's called). He'll be at the restaurant by now. I'll go by the shop, get the book and then go for an early lunch. Renew old acquaintances a bit, before he gets busy.

. . . Back. Good lunch. Good chat. I received no useful

impression pointing to his involvement.

“Tommy, got a minute?”

“Sure. Kitchen’s ready. Get you a pop?”

“Thanks. Haven’t seen much of you lately. You doing okay?”

“I’m good. Really good, I guess you could say.”

“How’s that?”

“You’ll never believe this.”

He pulled up a chair, turned it backwards and sat, resting his crossed arms on its back.

“The other day I found a envelope in my front seat with two thousand bucks in it! I took it down to the police station to see if anybody had reported it lost. Nobody had and they said that because it was inside my car I could keep it.”

“I’d say that sure was lucky, alright. What you going to do with it”

“Oh, I put most of it in the bank. I bought this shirt and a couple of CDs. I don’t really need much money. I make plenty here to handle everything.”

We talked for nearly half an hour. Not a trace of anything unusual. He seemed pleased I came by. I must do it more often. He was a good friend back when I really needed one. He loved the book and tried to pay me for it. Tommy is a nice person - slow, plodding, caring. Unless he was bamboozled into being somebody’s dupe, he had nothing to do with the blackmail episode. Since he kept the money, it would not have benefited anybody else. Well, except to further the torturing of Peter Alexander. Who in his life would be looking out for him? Bruce and Adam’s family? I’m sure there also must be other possibilities about which I just have no way of knowing. His mother still lives over on Johnson Street. He has a steady girlfriend! Hearing that engendered immediate relief to some small part of the guilt pouch in my psyche.

I’m not sure where my head is (well, I suppose that may be the understatement of the decade!!) My reference was to the fact that I fully intended to set up a shrink appointment today - Sunday. Daaaa! I am going to get the sack and note ready, now.

. . . That deed is done. I calculated the size of the pile of

bills in ten thousand dollars. It is surprisingly small when done in increments of one hundred dollar bills. A hundred bills stand only a bit over an inch high when crisp new bills are used. I put a small block of wood, which I found in my tool box, in the bottom of the sack for weight, added the note on top, printed in 16 point type in case BM is old or in any other way has impaired vision, and then stapled the top of the bag - brown paper - together with a half dozen staples. I hope that will influence him to leave before he opens it. Opened here, he might get mad and go on another apartment wrecking rampage. We'll see. I guess.

The note reads: "*The bank says it is impossible to cash the bonds so quickly. They are old and the numbers must be authenticated by the issuing company. They assure me the transaction can be completed by Wednesday - or Thursday at the latest.*"

I had the urge to add, "I suppose your choice, then, is to go ahead and kill me now and forego the \$10,000 or wait another two or three days." I didn't, not wanting to anger him by suggesting he was too dumb to figure that out by himself.

I feel somewhat smug about the plan. I hope I am not being reckless. I hope the delay and inconvenience forces BM to do something that will give me some clue as to his identity.

I'm going on line now to learn about this cell phone. My plan is to see if I can't locate the phone from which the call to me was made.

. . . Two hours later. Well, I discovered this phone does everything but cook breakfast and I'm not fully convinced it couldn't be taught to do that. The origin number on the call from BM had been somehow blocked - I guess there are numbers you can punch in when making a call that will do that. So, in that regard I'm no further than before. I discovered, however, that I can keep a voice recording of calls that come in. If there is a next time I will capture the message in that way and then listen to it later in an attempt to figure out who it is. I am convinced that I know the voice. Interestingly, the same fate has befallen it as has the images of faces that have so rapidly and completely faded from my mind.

I have copied the number of the psychologist in

Evansville and put it into my billfold, ready to call first thing in the morning. I feel very good about that decision. I just hope she can work me in immediately. If, not, I'm going to ask her to refer me to someone else in whom she has confidence. I really want to get this thing over with.

I've been thinking a lot about Jack Jackson - the hitchhiker. It is another face I can't recall but his voice remains clear to me. Logically, I know, he could have played no part in any of this. For some reason, I just keep thinking about him as one of the bad guys. That's interesting. A plural there - guys. The coincidence of our meeting logically rules out any fore-planning. But, could he have gotten into my mind on the trip and taken advantage of it? Could some of this be him and not the original BM?

When I first viewed this journal, this morning, as it lay on the table beside my bed, it reminded me that up at the Campgrounds, there is - or used to be - a sign-in book inside the main shelter. No one is required to sign in but lots of folks do. I'm going to drive back out there now and see if there are names and addresses of any folks from the day of my accident.

. . . Ed the insurance guy just dropped off a sizeable check for the insurance settlement. He also gave me some forms to have the neurologist fill out. He says my medical rider will pay the whole six hundred dollars plus reimburse me for the time off work to have the exam. Do I have some great insurance or WHAT! (Even so, I can't bring myself to apologize to my HMO for what I said about its user-unfriendly bureaucratic bent.) I'll take care of that tomorrow over my lunch break - provided BM hasn't done his evil deed by then.

I am scared. Really scared. I've been trying to keep busy in order to keep my mind off it, but, god, how I am scared. I still feel safe until the bag is discovered so whatever I need to get done out of earshot of other people, I better get done soon. I programmed 911 into speed dial on my new phone. I'm leaving for the campground now. I'll stop by the cabin to say goodbye - woops! - I fully intended to say "Hi" to Cat. That sent my blood pressure through the ceiling. 'Goodbye'? There certainly seems to be some part of me that's fully pessimistic about the outcome of all this.

I need to keep busy. I am leaving now.

. . . It may well be a conspiracy - like what I wrote earlier today about Jack's involvement. If not him, then maybe several somebody else's. I spotted no fewer than five men wearing green ball caps as I drove out of town. Not all together - just spread along the way, as if they knew what route I would be taking. Several waved at me. I can't remember ever being this alert. I jump at every sound, every movement, every shadow and cloud.

Cat's in my lap - apparently fully unaware of my predicament. An odd statement - as if there is any way he could be. Is part of me seriously considering that this cat might be a part of all this? If so, I am fully insane. No, because I could think that, I cannot have slipped past the line yet. I suppose that should be a relief.

I have now been to the Campground. There were three sets of campers. One was a young family with three kids all under twelve or so. The second was a 'hippy-like' couple apparently living there in a makeshift tee-pee. An older couple - well, in their mid to late sixties - was camping out of a twenty foot RV. I stayed my distance and eventually got to the sign-in book. There were only two names on the day of my accident. Mine was not among them. That surprised me. I certainly thought I would have signed the book. Not sure why, but it is how I am. It may be a good thing I didn't, considering that could implicate me in whatever . . . enough said, I guess.

Both were 'John's'. That is eerie! John Peterson and John and Kris Appleton. Peterson is from Springfield but I don't know him. He gave no street address but I'll look him up in the phone book when I get back to town. I'm hoping he may be able to fill in some of the missing parts of my life that day. Maybe trigger something so my memory can return. The couple just listed their address as Ohio. I doubt if going to Ohio would help me find them though picking up and running away has certainly crossed my mind a lot today.

Among the strangest coincidences of my life, on a whim, I just called the doctor's office in Evansville - almost four p. m. on Sunday afternoon. Would you believe she was in. Said she had just stopped in to pick up a book. I have an appointment

for Tuesday at one. She made me feel very comfortable. You know how sometimes you meet a person for the first time and it feels like you've known them all your life! That's how I feel about her. I feel some relief. Some confidence, in fact. Let me just live that long!?

I also called Carolyn and I'm going to her place about seven this evening. She said we'd order in pizza. That sounded unbelievably wonderful. I do believe that I love that lady. What a terrible time in my life to fall in love. I don't want to put her in any danger. Again, I should be in no danger yet tonight.

Cat rolled over onto his back. He's now granting me the privilege of rubbing his tummy. Interestingly, when he's on his back, he keeps his eyes open. He's looking at me as if to say, "This is really pretty nice - just the two of us here together - not a care in the World." (Well, all analogies break down sooner or later!!) If I could only escape into Cat's world for a few days and leave this terrible sense of dread behind. Interesting. In his world, he would be the provider, the teacher and protector for me - the novice, the unskilled, the unschooled. I wonder if he would reciprocate and care for me. How can I possibly be allowing such thoughts? It may well be a signal that I am inching ever closer to the brink, ready to take that plunge into the crevice of no return.

There is one more real world thing I feel the need to enter here before I leave for town and Carolyn's. The man, of the older couple, was wearing a green cap. He kept me under surveillance the whole time I was at the campground. At one point I sensed he was moving toward me so I turned my back and walked in the opposite direction. I got into my car and left.

Also, interesting! As I descended the road and approached the point where my car had left the road, I had a series of fleeting images. Not clear but not completely indistinct. They were confusing. It was me in a car on that road. That I take as very reassuring in terms of the memory problem. A harbinger of its imminent return, I hope. The confusion came in that I seemed to be in the back seat. I doubt if I would have chosen to sit in the back seat of a runaway car about to careen off into space, heading for a rocky landing forty feet below.

It makes me think I had been forced into the back seat and then the car was put into motion to carry me to my death. BM??? Perhaps it was he who had tried to kill me - Haven't I had that thought before? No matter. That would make him an enemy of mine - specifically. No coincidence. No chance sighting of me doing some horrendous deed. And, probably no video pictures of any event involving me - grey or otherwise.

If I could only believe that I think I would feel much better. I feel less need to escape - either to Ohio or insanity and I do assume they are not synonymous - though I've never been to Ohio. Good. That tinged on humor. No chuckle but it was certainly headed back in the direction of optimism.

For some reason, I suddenly feel better. So does Cat, I assume. He yawned, stretched, and left my lap with his patented flip to a four-point landing. He has now disappeared among the tall grass. I'll leave him a dish of food on the porch for later and then be on my way. Do I spoil him or what? It seems like I really need somebody to take care of, doesn't it? (Having no one to answer that I'll do it myself. "Yes, it certainly does!")

I'm glad I'm feeling better, even though I can't put my finger on why. I don't want to be down while I'm with Carolyn this evening - or tonight depending on how things progress. (smile) Interesting.

## Chapter Eleven: *The Sack and Stall*

The evening with Carolyn was wonderful - just an easy, relaxed, comfortable time. I came back to my apartment about eleven and went right to bed. It's six fifteen and I am as anxious now as I was content last evening. It is a driven variety of anxiety that keeps me alert but scattered in my focus. It's hard to describe. It's unpleasant and probably ineffective at best. I'm showered, shaved and ready to begin the day. As I showered I wondered if it would be the last time I would ever shower. As I shaved I wondered if it would be the last time I would shave. If nothing else, BM has clearly made a believer out of me, hasn't he? (Yes, he has.)

What's this about me now taking time to answer my own rhetorical questions? Perhaps when I see a question that has an obvious answer I am rushing in to provide it - to take some solace in being able to demonstrate that I am in control of at least something.

The sack is in place. I will leave the doors and windows locked when I leave since I was given no instructions to the contrary and access appears to be no obstacle for BM. How I wish I could be a mouse in the corner (or a cat, perhaps) to see just how this all comes down (sounds like cop show dialog!).

This will sound bizarre but I feel quite optimistic in a terrified sort of way. I wonder if, perhaps, that's how John Glenn felt that first time he went blasting into space atop that overgrown firecracker. I will eat and then leave for work a bit early. I want to be away from here as soon as possible this morning. Later.

. . . 9:30 a.m. I took half an hour and went to the bank,

then back to the apartment with my briefcase - in case BM was monitoring my movements. I needed to make it all look legitimate in terms of my report in the note. Just as I thought my heart could beat no harder, I saw Bruce and Adam down the street as I drove away from my place - both were wearing green ball caps and they stared at me as I turned the corner and drove out of their sight. They stared at me - not like Cat, fully surprised that I have not anticipated one of his needs; not like Carolyn when she looks deep into my eyes as we sit together on her couch; not like customers while they ask questions. It was the look I think one would give if they knew you were going away for a long, long, time. It was terrifying. It was distressing - distressing in that I felt my own loss relative to them. It was as if they meant a whole lot more to me than seems in any way reasonable. Odd. My lost adolescence? I can't clarify it further.

I'm back here at the Shop now. A few minutes ago, I tried to reach J. A. by phone. Not only was there no answer, but his voice mail did not engage. I've never experienced that before. I asked Cindy if she had heard anything from him. She laughed an exaggerated laugh, meaning it would seem out of place to hear from him. He seldom comes around or calls. I'm sure she thought it was an odd question but her response just seemed overdone.

I must say it was unnerving to be unable to contact him. I guess I was counting on finding him safe and sound - more than I realized. I so don't want to have caused him harm. I need to call St. Agnes again.

. . . Still no word about Father O'Malley. I expressed my concern to Father Lester. His reaction was one of surprise that I had reason to be worried. It's been what, ten days or more without hearing. It seems irrational not to be concerned about his welfare. Perhaps it is not I who am slipping into insanity but those around me.

I had a horrendous time last night. I slept very little. Although I have become used to fighting demons each night, I have at least been sleeping right through the struggle. It has provided physical rest if not mental rejuvenation. Not so last night. I was restless. I awoke often. I chilled at the shadows

and took fright at the noises during the brief thunderstorm. I saw human forms projected against my window shade - my window on the second floor. I was fearful of turning my back either on the door or the window across the room so I slept on my back, rifle and hand gun at the ready. My neck and back are stiff and sore - like I assume it would feel to be an arthritic ninety-year old.

As my eyes would flutter and close, I welcomed sleep because I was so tired and yet I fought it as I became more and more terrified. I felt six years old again. I wanted to run down the hall to my parents' room and snuggle safely between them. Fear always waned, then. Sleep always came, then. I tried to recall the sound of mother's voice as she would sing, "Hush little baby." I could not reconstruct it. I trembled. I yearned for the feel of her warm hand brushing the hair back from my brow as she dispatched my fear and filled my being with relief and security

The hours during which sleep over took me were likewise discomfoting. The images were there again. They were huge - covering my entire view. I saw the two faces so clearly. I know that I did but upon awaking they were gone. They teemed with meaning. They were screaming. I distinctly remember they were both screaming - and crying as if terrified.

Thinking and writing about it, I am sweating and dizzy. My vision is blurred and I have to blink it back into focus. I must leave these thoughts now. I must close this journal and get back to work. I feel so helpless - useless - contemptible. I think that's a new feeling - a new realization. I certainly don't like it. I am going to stop now.

. . . I'm sitting in a booth at *The Junction Café*, a diner on the edge of town - one I seldom frequent. At five I locked the Shop but couldn't face the prospect of going home. It is as if not knowing is better than knowing. So long as I don't know what BM's response is, it is as if he has still made no response. I ordered a salad. I hate salad. I ordered Italian Dressing. I hate Italian Dressing. I ordered a large vanilla shake. That I am enjoying. I always have coffee with a shake. I wonder if other people do that. Coffee goes with sweet and cola goes with salt. Fruit juice goes with salad. I am engaging in

diversionary thoughts, I know that. I'm afraid to go home. I suppose nothing is as utterly terrifying as the unknown (hence, religion!).

I thought about calling Carolyn and going over there or taking her out for dinner but I could never put her in harm's way and I have the feeling I am definitely now in harm's way. It was a dumb plan - the sack and stall. BW knows everything about me. What led me to believe he would not also know this is all just a way to buy time?

Oh. My! A man in a green ball cap just came in and sat down across the dining room - he requested a different booth from the one the hostess first offered him - one from which he can easily keep his eye on me. Surely, he would not attempt anything here. I'll stay and see if he will leave first. I'm afraid to leave for fear he will follow me. Why? If it is BM he knows where to find me. If that makes no sense, then why am I reacting with palpitations in my chest and pricklies up my neck?

I'll just slowly drink my 'shake' (a strange thing to be sucking on as I sit here 'quaking' in my boots - well, cheap Walmart tennis shoes, as they are). He never looks directly at me but surveys the entire room from time to time so he won't appear obvious. Should I engage his eyes in a determined show down, confirming that I know who he is, or should I ignore him?

It is time for a confrontation. I will focus on him until he has to acknowledge me.

There! He saw me looking at him. Strange. He held my view for several seconds and nodded as if acknowledging it. Then he went back to the menu. He even smiled - warmly I could say.

I have let my warped imagination run wild here. It's just a middle-aged man in a hat having dinner. Do you think? (Clearly, I'm not convinced of that!) I will finish my salad and shake. I don't want to leave the salad like I had planned because then I might appear to be in a hurry. I'll take my time. He may even leave first.

Interesting! I am afraid to be here in his presence and I am afraid to go home for fear he will be there waiting for me. An impossible set of scenarios, of course. But then the insane

can hold impossibly incompatible ideas simultaneously.

. . . I have finished my diner. He is still here. I am going to leave now and go back to my apartment. I will check my pistol in the car to make certain it has not, again, been emptied. After all, he was in the parking lot after I entered the diner. I will keep hold of the gun in my pants pocket as I enter my apartment. My rifle is in my car. I don't want to be seen carrying it up the stairs so I'll leave it loaded with the safety off, in the backseat in case I need to get it in a hurry. I won't lock the car. That seems to be my plan. How ironic it will be if for my last meal, I ate salad with Italian Dressing. Well, the shake and coffee were pretty good. Dear journal, I hope this is not the last I see of you.

. . . 8:30 p.m. It wasn't!!! I entered my place as planned - unable to take a breath yet seeing my heart pounding through my shirt and sweater. The sack is still on the couch where I left it - unopened. There was no one here. There is no phone message. I don't understand. I have turned on every light in the place and, with pistol at the ready, have searched every closet and the shower. I see no sign that anyone has been here. What's going on? More torture, no doubt. This guy really wants to upset me. 'Upset' is nowhere near strong enough. Distress. Terrify. Panic. Torment. Persecute. Push me over the edge into the chasm of lunacy.

Well, much more of this and I will welcome that deep, dark, hollow, emptiness where responsibility vanishes and living becomes meaningless. Another interesting continuum - Self-fulfillment to emptiness. Mental health to madness. Joy to numb. All of those the same??

I'm not sure how to proceed. Just wait and see what develops I suppose - what next move he makes. I'll keep my doctor's appointment tomorrow after lunch - if I'm still around to do that. I need a plan and I guess that is it. Go to bed, get up and go to work, drive to Evansville and put together some plan with Dr. Mathias. I sure hope she's good - great - excellent - the quintessential therapist.

. . . I just went to the window in my living room to close the drapes. Adam and Bruce are playing some one on one basketball in their driveway. I paused, watching for a moment,

filled with a strangely good feeling. I assume I must have been silhouetted against the light in the room because Adam spotted me and waved. He poked Bruce and pointed in my direction. Bruce also waved. I waved back and then drew the drapes. What is it about those boys? Maybe they just remind me of my good and more carefree teenage years. That's probably it. Oh, to have just one more carefree day!

Damn! This was my night to be at the Boys' and Girls' Club. It's too late to go now. I'll call Mike and apologize. They are always short staffed. I feel like a real jerk (as compared to what - an 'artificial' jerk???).

. . . That's done. Mike reported that things were well covered this evening so I don't have to be too concerned. It was my irresponsibility that bothers me more than anything. SEE! I AM A NICE GUY!

Oh! Oh! I'm usually not back here until well past ten on Monday nights. If BM knows that - and you know he does - he may have planned to come by under cover of darkness this evening. He may still be coming. I suppose the lights up here will dissuade him from going ahead with that plan. I hope so. I will leave the lights on all night, I guess. Cat hates it when I do that at the cabin. Cactus has never objected.

How is cactus, anyway? I've fully ignored him since his accident. . . . Amazingly he seems fit - all of him. There are now six cacti apparently doing well where there was just one before. No dehydration. No drooping. Just six happy looking little prickly plants, sucking life from wet sand through rootless, cleanly sliced, 'feet'. I suppose I can still call the collection Cactus. It may be more appropriate to now call it Cacti. Six friends should be better than one.?

Why am I so studiously, deliberating a name for a wasteland weed?

It's still early but I think I should go to bed. I want my wits about me tomorrow when I meet with Dr. Mathias. I wouldn't want her to think there was anything wrong with me. How absurd can I be? Do you suppose she just might have a hint that something is wrong since I've made an appointment to see her?

I see my manuscript on the coffee table. I need to get

back to it. 'Need' was a strange choice of word. I write because I 'want' to not because I need to - or is that really true? Interesting. Very interesting!

. . . Also, very interesting. I just realized the two main characters have the names of my parents - Jack and Virginia. I guess there is nothing wrong or out of place with that. It just seems so strange that I have been unaware of that 'should-a-been' obvious connection. As I think about it now, it seems fine - right, even - that the heroes of my novel are named after the heroes of my real life. They were my heroes.

They were my heroes, weren't they? Some doubt about that has swiftly crept across my mind. A chilling wave washed over me. It is as if my relationship with them was not really all that good. It is so strange that I am confused about it now. And I am really confused. It's like I had two sets of parents - physical clones but emotional opposites. A warm, happy, laughing set when I was young but a distant, forlorn, somber set when I grew older.

Why would I suddenly be confused about that? I am confused about so many things - too many things. I can't get to the shrink too soon. I am going to get undressed and try to get some sleep. I won't take the sleeping pills because I may need to be alert if BW decides to pay me a visit. I will push the couch across the front door and wedge a broom across the kitchen door. The windows are locked. I'll have my guns. I'll pull the dresser in front of my locked bedroom door. My cell phone. I must make sure that is with me. He could cut the line to my regular phone. A candle. I'll take candles - and matches - into the bedroom, too, in case he shuts off my electricity.

. . . I am now quite sure I have begun my final descent into madness. I just undressed. From my head, I removed a green ball cap. How could it have gotten there? When could it have gotten there? Why would it have gotten there? I've never wanted my mama more than this minute. I can't stop crying - chest heaving, streaming tears, sobbing out loud, crying. Does a man my age dare suck his thumb?

The barricading is done. I am as secure in here as I can get. I am so exhausted. Perhaps I should save BM the trouble and do myself in. One small movement of one small finger and

it could all be over. God help me. What a strange and out of character thing for me to keep saying. An idiom I will assume - devoid of literal translation.

## Chapter Twelve: *The Abyss Is In Sight*

It appears that I survived the night. I have not ventured out into the other rooms yet but I have showered and shaved. No wait. I haven't shaved. I wear a full, closely cropped, beard. I am so confused. I am dressed and about to move the dresser and open the door. I will carry my pistol just in case BM is there. How will I recognize him? I suppose if anyone is out there it will be he. Do I shoot first? Do I engage him in dialog first? What will I ask him? Who are you? Are you BM? (Of course, he wouldn't know about BM - well, he just might if he's been reading these pages.)

. . . No one in the apartment. No one molested either door. It is a relief. I feel foolish but still my palms will not stop sweating. My head will not stop throbbing. My stomach is knotted. My mouth is dry. I am not hungry. In fact, it is doubtful that I could keep anything down. My mouth is parched - I probably slept on my back with my mouth open - so I will have some water.

I must find some way to hold myself together. I will be at the Bookshop alone until eleven. Then Cindy will come in and handle it by herself this afternoon. It's good that I have that responsibility to fulfill. I will go to work. Without her there, I won't have to be so careful. I'll handle the customers with a smile and as little interaction as possible. Why is being responsible so important to me at this point. Because, I'm a NICE person. I'm a GOOD person. I'm a RESPONSIBLE person. Why doesn't that count for anything with BM? So I made one big mistake - ONE! Doesn't a lifetime of good deeds counterbalance one mistake? Certainly not in the court system.

Maybe among friends.

It seems I am admitting to one mistake; to one really, really big mistake, I assume. What? When? Against whom? Maybe what BM witnessed didn't take place recently. Maybe it is something that took place months or even years ago. I had not considered that. Maybe that's why I've forgotten it. It happened a long time ago. Grey videotape. Maybe a long time ago videotapes were just black and white - shades of grey. I don't know. Why pull it out now? I don't know.

I don't know so many things anymore. I sit here at the kitchen table looking around and it seems I don't really belong here. It is just the opposite of the awakening experience that I had that first morning. Then, I didn't know where I was. Now, I know, but it doesn't make sense that I am here.

The bag is still on the couch in case BM comes today. I have had a full glass of water, one sip at a time. My mouth is not so dry. My stomach feels somewhat better. I think I'll make a piece of toast. I don't want my stomach growling in the presence of customers this morning. Why not? It would mean I am less than perfect. Gosh! I equate stomach noises with personal failure. I am nuts!!!

. . . Well, I made it to the Shop. It is early. The shop doesn't officially open for another hour but I've propped the doors open to help rid the place of the mustiness that regularly gathers overnight in the old building. It's a pretty, April, morning.

Suddenly I'm afraid to be here alone. I left my office and came up front. I'm sitting near the window in a reading chair by the coffee pot. I put on the coffee when I first arrived. I'll try some. Caffeine! ///That's what I need; a little more nervousness. Feed my jitters! Smart!\\ \\ I am so alert now that I can't finish forming a word on this page without looking about between letters. Perhaps that's not alertness but scattered attention. Maybe scattered is nothing more than being super alert, focusing on everything rather than on only a single thing.

That reminds me of first grade. My teacher was always telling me to pay attention. I was paying attention just not to her. There were so many more fascinating things to focus on - the subtle flickering of the light fixtures that I could only detect

with my peripheral vision; the way a tiny stream of chalk particles fell into the tray as she wrote on the board; the way her left cheek tensed as she approached me to tell me to pay attention; the way the clock made its ticking sound a fraction of a second before the minute hand jerked ahead. I felt sorry for my teacher - that she was missing all those fascinating things going on around her. As I re-envision her coming down the isle toward me with her arms folded, I now see the face of the Wicked Witch from the Wizard of Oz. I recall having felt sorry for her as well - so ugly, such an irritating voice, so apparently powerful and yet so easily vulnerable.

My night was odd. I don't remember awakening one single time and I dropped off almost immediately. I must have been even more exhausted than I realized. I now have a clear image of the faces. Two boys. I don't recognize either one of them though the images remain vivid in my mind to this moment. Once the images became clear to me, the crying and screaming ceased. Perhaps that's why I was finally able to sleep. It was as if they were crying to be recognized. Drivel! The writer in me is taking things too far down Fantasy Lane. They are both smiling well posed smiles - the older one missing two front teeth. Smiling children don't cry - well, not on the outside at least.

A customer just came in. No, it's not a customer it's Carolyn. Oh, No! Not Carolyn!! I'll have to really get it together here. Quickly and believably. Coffee. Maybe coffee will help. I'm grasping.

"Carolyn! Good morning. What a nice surprise."

I approached her and kissed her on the cheek. She reciprocated in kind.

"I was worried about you," she said. "I called and called you last evening but no one answered."

"Really. There must be some problem with my line. I didn't hear it ring once. I'll check it out this evening. I need to give you my cell phone number anyway."

(Either the line had been cut or I had slept the sleep of the dead.)

"How about offering a girl a cup of coffee. I have ten minutes," she said smiling her wonderful smile.

We walked together toward the reading area and the urn. I poured and we sat. At that moment, Bruce and Adam entered.

“Mr. P! Morning!” Adam said enthusiastically. I couldn’t remember personally ever being that pleasant, that early in the day, during my adolescent years.

“Morning. May I help you?”

“You may if you can,” Bruce joked, receiving a jab to the ribs from his brother. “Need a book about Babe Ruth. Got a term paper to do. Thought I’d compare and contrast the lives and legacies of Cobb and Ruth.”

“Interesting. I don’t recall a single book that does that. Make it long enough and you just might find a publisher.”

“Long enough in this case will be exactly the required ten pages excluding cover page and bibliography, 12-point type with one inch margins all around,” he smiled.

I returned his smile, suddenly recalling the universal, schoolboy, perspective on such things.

“I have two on Ruth, I believe.”

“Stay with your lady,” Adam said, repeatedly raising his eyebrows. “We’ll find it.”

They went in search of the sports section much like two skirmishing bulls in the preverbal china shop. ‘Too much sugar on their cereal,’ I thought.

“Two great kids there, if I do say so myself,” Carolyn said. I somehow missed the context of her reference. We talked for a few more minutes, then she stood, kissed me on my cheek and left. I went to assist the boys who had the two books in tow by the time I arrived.

“Got a twofer, today, Mr. P?” Bruce asked.

I don’t recall having been referred to as Mr. P. before. I assume it was intended to be one step more formal than merely, ‘Pete’, and one less formal than Mr. A or Mr. Alexander. It actually tickles me.

“Sure, always a twofer fer you two.”

They chuckled at my faint attempt at humor. I figured a discount for them, took their money, and they were also on their way.

Adam called, “See you tonight,” as they turned onto the sidewalk.

See me tonight? What in the world did he mean? The Boys' Club, maybe, although tonight isn't one of my evenings - I'm there Monday and Wednesday. He probably just meant they would see me when I arrived home after work or maybe it was an idiomatic, "Goodbye". I sat back down and continued to write. And so, here I am.

Actually, I feel some better. It was great to see Carolyn and fun having the boys drop in. I must ask them to marry me once all of this is behind me - her, I must ask her to marry me. I'm not focusing. I just have three hours left to focus and then I'll be on my way to Evansville. (That seems to imply once there, I can - or may - fall apart!?)

That reminds me that I need to begin looking for a car. My insurance rental payment runs out this Friday. Tomorrow after work - no that's my night at the Boys' Club. Thursday after work. I know what I want. Shouldn't take long.

Speaking of Evansville, I still haven't got down there to look up the address I found on that post-it in my wallet. I'll try to make time while I'm there this afternoon. And THAT reminds me that I still haven't jotted down Dr. Mathias's address. That would seem to be important.

The coffee tasted pretty good. I'll have another and then get the register counted in for the day. Routine. Regular routine seems to be helping. Some structure to hold on to - to guide me through the morning. The register first, then the mop across the floor, and run the shelves in search of the OPB's (out of place books). That produced a chuckle. I just explained to myself what OPB means. Throw in a few customers and I just may make it through the morning.

That non-ringing phone last evening bothers me. I'll call home on my cell phone and see if it's still out of order.

. . . I got through to my answering machine. Maybe she was mistakenly calling the wrong number. If she punched up the wrong one the first time and then kept hitting redial, she might have been ringing the wrong number all evening. Or, I suppose it is possible that I was so deeply asleep that it didn't rouse me. That's doubtful. I don't think it's ever happened to me before, but then none of this has ever happened to me before. Could I have been under hypnosis? Jack phoning in

some post hypnotic suggestion to keep my asleep while . . . nowhere to go with all that.

I have the idea that 'shrink logic' is going to lead doc to suggest I contact the police. I've thought about it a lot but I'm still really uncomfortable about it. That reminds me, I still need to get hold of the secretary at the Sheriff's Office. Maybe when I get home. I don't want to clutter up my mind with anything else before I go shrinkward this noon.

Insurance papers. I forgot the insurance papers. I'll need to stop by home and pick them up. I think I need a list.

- 1- Get Doc's address,
- 2- get the insurance papers,
- 3- call Sheriff,
- 4- look at cars,
- 5- look up 'wallet address' when I'm in Evansville today.

I'm suddenly hungry. Wish the donut guy would hurry up and get here. That's just what an upset stomach craves - sugar and fat!! Throw in a few pretzels for salt and I could probably initiate internal bleeding!

. . . It is now four customers and two donuts later. My mind is quite clearly muddled. I had trouble locating a book for an old gentleman. I went to the wrong side of the store in search of English Literature. Strange. More and more I am feeling uncertain about my surroundings. I must hold on. I must not cross that line. This is real. I am only really me when I am here in this place, now. Just a few more hours. I can make it, can't I? . . . What? No answer? No reassurance to my allegorical question? (Allegorical? Geeze!!!)

. . . I am ready to leave for Evansville. My heart sank as I entered the living room to find my answering machine blinking. BW, I thought. I considered not listening to it until I returned this evening but knew I would be kicking myself all afternoon if I didn't. It wasn't BM - well, in one sense it was. How ironic - It was Dr. Betty Mathias's secretary calling to remind me of my appointment. Professionals certainly don't trust the common man in that regard. I wonder if those reminder calls are for the benefit of the patient or the professional's wallet.

I believe there are coincidences. I am not going to allow my paranoia to turn that simple BM fluke into some big scary,

emotional, upheaval. It is remarkable, though, how some self-protective mental mechanism kicks in when a potentially threatening experience rears its head. I'm hearing a growing chorus of inner voices saying, "Don't go. Don't go!" I can garner enough will power to override them for the time being but I know those voices from deep within me will win in the end - they ALWAYS win in the end.

I have a new, real life, threat to deal with anyway. When I arrived home a few minutes ago, to pick up the insurance papers, I parked out front and then walked around to the back to come up the outside stairs to the kitchen. Someone was on the landing tampering with the door. I moved back into the shadows. He soon left, unable to get in, I assume. If BM, I don't understand since he seems to have come and gone at will, earlier. Did I change the locks? I intended to. I can't remember. Not a good sign. Anyway, as he approached the bottom of the steps I got a good look. It was Terry Hoffman from the apartment on the opposite end of the second floor. He has his own set of stairs so had no reason to be there. Quiet mannered Terry as BM. It doesn't fit and yet he does seem to live beyond his means. Perhaps blackmail is how he does it. He crossed the patio and made his way up the stairs to his own apartment. He didn't see me, I am sure of that. Since I'm virtually never home over the noon hour, I assume he would not have expected me to be here. I waited a minute and then came on up.

The sack is right where it has been from the beginning. Nothing seems to have been moved so I'm guessing Terry didn't gain entrance. If he is BM, perhaps he assumed I would leave the door open for him - though as I have stated before, it wasn't mentioned in the instructions. I probably should have anyway - just in case. I can't risk irritating the man. I need for him to find my note of explanation. I'll leave it open this time when I leave.

Speaking of notes. I received only one piece of mail today and it was miss-sent here. It was for J. A. How someone got my address confused with his, I'm not sure. The good news is there were no bills. (Faint smile!) If getting J. A's. mail by mistake is the bad news, then the postal thing turned out pretty

well today, I suppose.

Cindy said a strange thing as I left the Shop. She said, "Looks like a beautiful day to be driving down to Evansville. Enjoy it for me, okay?"

I am so sure that I didn't tell her where I was going. I did put it on my day book but I always carry that in my hip pocket. I must have let it slip, I suppose. Cindy as BM - the most unlikely of the candidates?

Things just don't seem to be the way they should be. Like this apartment. I know it's mine and yet it feels foreign. Wishful thinking, perhaps. Maybe I want so much just to run away - escape - from all of this that my mind is trying to distance me from what is familiar here. (Seems that it took a substantial stretch to arrive at that!)

My logic is still good but the premises upon which I seem to be building it are faulty. That is a prime symptom of the paranoid schizophrenic - tight logic flowing from a faulty premise. (People wearing green hats are part of a conspiracy against me; therefore, I must be wary of and avoid all green capped people I run across.) I don't know the green hats are against me but I have been assuming they are - I have been taking that as a given - a basic belief or premise. I have no proof of that so I must try to shake it. Hell, even I was wearing a green cap the other night and for sure I'm not out to get me!

An interesting thought. Unprovable premises forming the basis from which logical ideas then flow not only identifies the paranoid schizophrenic but also those who believe in gods.

It's eleven thirty. I must get on my way. It's a good hour's drive to Evansville. Cindy was right. It should be a beautiful drive. Mid-April is always gorgeous around here. That reminds me, I have a birthday coming up in about six weeks - thirty-eight - two away from the big 4 - 0. I'm not sure why forty seems to be such a line of demarcation for so many folks. It does speak to me. It says, "Hurry up and get married before you forget why the female gender was placed on this planet." (Such a statement would seem to acknowledge some elements of a supernatural plan.)

. . . I'm sitting in doc's waiting room. Her secretary has my insurance forms and I have completed four pages of

personal history. It's a good thing that I arrived thirty minutes early. About coincidences. Here's another one for you. That address in my wallet - it was the address of this very building. Of course, there are some twenty offices - mostly medical - in it. With this fuzzy memory thing going on, it may be that I came here for some other medical problem or brought a friend here for treatment.

I didn't recognize the building. In fact, I didn't make the connection even when I pulled into the parking lot. I saw that I had some time before my appointment so I thought I might be able to look up that address while I killed time. (Killed time - what a strange and discomfoting saying - perhaps a synonym for amnesia.) I dug out the post-it and bam!!! I was there.

Like I said, I didn't and still don't recognize anything about the building. I read down the list of doctor's names on the directory in the lobby. None of them rang a bell either. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of it all was that it seems to be no big deal to me. It could be that I took down the address but never came here. For whatever reason, I am unrealistically unconcerned about it. A friendly neighbor seen knocking on my door sends me into conniptions, but this doesn't ruffle a hair on my head (or face - curious, about that.).

I found myself searching that directory in an interesting fashion - for names with the BM combination. There were five, actually: Bobby Miner, a physical therapist; Bill Miller, MD; Beatrice Munson, MD; Bahja, Musjcal, MD; and Bruce Mendenhal, DDS. That makes six BM's in one office building. I seem to have no special reaction to the finding but it had been important for me to investigate it. (How about Barry Manilow and Bette Midler?)

I brought my journal along thinking it might be useful for Dr. Mathias. I've been rereading passages that jump out at me as I page through it. The philosophic diatribe against religion - well, I suppose it was more an attempt to lay a logical basis FOR thinking in ways that were freed from the fantasies of another, shadow world - made me wonder several things. It set me speculating about whether that represented my firmly held beliefs or merely reiterated my genuine, long term, doubts. It will be interesting to see how all that plays out over the next . .

. who knows how long all of this may take. I know I am eager to get it started. Interesting. Frightened and yet eager - 'freager'. There, I coined a new word for the occasion. (Idiosyncratic language - pretty schiziel!)

It's a feeling I had often as a teenager. Certain things I just had to do - to try. I couldn't seem to keep myself from attempting them even though I was terrified. Like diving off the cliff at the gravel pit - a forty-foot plunge into thirty feet of water so cold it paralyzed your diaphragm. Or, hitching a ride on the train speeding by - grabbing onto the ladder on a box car and climbing onto the top, standing upright and experiencing the wind whipping my hair until my scalp felt afire. In some ways those feelings seem justified - appropriate - for a teenager, but not now, not for a grown man who takes his life's responsibilities seriously. Perhaps it was about learning to face ones fears at a time when life seemed to hold so many of them. I suppose that may be the difference. The terror feels the same, regardless.

. . . A small, square, white envelope just fell out of my journal as I paged back toward the front. Let's see what that's all about. I'll say this; any unexpected, not immediately explainable event - even as small as this envelope - sets my heart racing.

. . . It was actually a relief, I suppose. It was from Terry and contained an invitation to a barbeque he and his friends are hosting for everybody who lives in the apartments. I remember, now, finding it stuck in the screen door that last time I entered my place. I guess I must have slid it into the journal as I was fumbling with my keys and forgot about it.

One might think the straightforward interpretation - taking the invitation at its neighborly, face value - would evaporate my paranoiac interpretation of what Terry might have been doing at my door, but it doesn't. It (the paranoia) comes right back with, "Sure, anybody as smart as BM would have a contingency excuse at hand in case he was caught or to explain his actions if he had been spied from afar. Fascinating. Terrifying. I realize it is fully illogical, based on everything I actually know about Terry, and yet I cling to that suspicion with all my being based on my assumption that anyone tampering

with my door today, has to be my nemesis - BM.

I hope that being able to see the illogic in my currently preferred, shoddy logic is a good sign. I'm pretty sure I couldn't have done that a week ago. Strange. Seeing it and even understanding it does nothing to deter my use of it. My mind seems to be reconstructing itself with no guidance from me. I wonder if the insane are able to see the world as others see it but in some way set that aside in a safe compartment where it can't interfere with the functions of their necessary and essential demented perspective. (That may be the first time the word 'demented' has been used in the past forty years!) I suppose that not being able to see one's illogic is a condition of the transition from sanity to insanity - from connection to disconnection. Perhaps once the transition is complete, both can be contemplated, but with reality being firmly denied, it is viewed as some impotent fantasy - something adhered to only by those who have not apprehended the Truth. (Sounds like religion, again. Some part of me continues to define religion as a form of universally sanctioned insanity. Fascinating!).

In the past, I think I have viewed religion more as a defense mechanism than lunacy. I am amazed that even in this state of mental meltdown I continue to have such interesting thoughts - creative, even. Perhaps the line between creative genius and insanity IS indeed fine. My reaction to that is interesting. I immediately redefined 'fine' as meaning 'wonderful' rather than 'exceedingly narrow'. I chuckled out loud. The secretary looked at me over her glasses. I wonder if she is taking notes for Doc. (Another chuckle. Another look. Perhaps, another note. I could care less. That's why I'm here.)

It is also interesting to me that depression has not played a major, continuing role in all this. A little, sometimes, but not constant or debilitating. It is as if there is an underpinning of hope buried deep beneath all this. Perhaps that relates to my basic positive stance about the world and people and life. Perhaps some part of me believes that I have something special to look forward to - something tremendously important. I must admit that I don't have an inkling as to what that might be. It just seems to be Cacti, Cat and me for certain. Carolyn for maybe. Well, BM surely seems to be for certain. If Doc presses

me to go to the authorities, I have decided that I will. It's time to get this thing solved - finished - put behind me one way or another.

I just experienced a sudden and fully bizarre flash across my consciousness. I wished that Carolyn were here with me, that Cat was here, and most strangely of all that Adam and Bruce were here squirting me with silly string. I suppose that underscores that I have arrived in this office none too soon!?! (Wow! That punctuation certainly reflects the ultimate uncertainty.)

Sitting here writing, I have wondered if I should have prepared written notes for Dr. Mathias. It hadn't crossed my mind earlier. So, I guess I'll just wing it. I assume she will have questions to ask and I can just respond. I'm not sure how she goes about it all. I see, from the obligatory, framed, diplomas on the wall, that she received her Ph. D. from Vanderbilt University thirteen years ago, and holds a variety of other training certificates - hypnotherapy from Duke University and a recent certificate in biofeedback from Kansas State. She is licensed by the state and is a member of the American Psychological Association, Clinical Psychology Division.

Her credentials seem in order. If I don't like what happens, I certainly don't have to come back. I feel pretty comfortable about it, though. When I first heard about her I wondered if I would feel at ease talking to a woman. It seems to pose no problem for me. Mom was a woman as I recall. (smile) Carolyn is a woman - MY, is she a woman! (SMILE!!!)

I'm ready, Doc. Let's get things underway. Her office door is opening. I suppose this is it. (I note the finality implied in that phrase.) Later.

### Chapter Thirteen: *Surprise, Peter!*

It was a calm, low, alto voice that I recall first hearing.

“I will now count backwards from five to one. When I reach one you will be fully awake, feeling fine and refreshed and you will remember everything that you have discovered and revealed while you have been hypnotized. Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one. You are now fully awake and alert, and have been accompanied into consciousness by the images and memories you have experienced during the past several hours.”

My eyes fluttered open, momentarily pained as they adjusted to the light of the office. It was as if it were the first time I had seen that room and the smiling, attractive woman facing me from her chair across the low coffee table from the couch on which I was reclining. I looked around, surely appearing puzzled.

“Please, sit up when you’re ready. Make yourself comfortable.”

“Dr. Mathias?”

It was a question. My tone made that completely clear.

“Yes, John. I’m Betty Mathias. Glad to have you back.”

Back from hypnosis or back from . . . what? I wasn’t sure so I tried to ask.

“Back . . . ?”

“In a moment. First, how about beginning by telling me some things about yourself. Your name, for instance.”

“Jonathon Alexander Peterson. My friends call me John. My parents called me Johnny. They are both dead.”

“And your present family?”

It was as if my entire life was being power-forced through

some mental equivalent of an I-V. It rushed in upon me, engorging my being. It was too much all at once and yet it couldn't come fast enough.

"My present family. Well, there is my wife, Carolyn, of course. We were married during our sophomore year in college. And my two teenage sons, Adam and Bruce. Carolyn's father lives upstairs since her mother passed on a few months ago. We live in a large, two story house on Maple Street."

It was as if that description had a mutant, more hermit-like clone, stubbornly hidden somewhere in my mind. I moved on, listening for her next question.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I own a small chain of book stores. They pretty well run themselves. I have good managers."

"What do your managers call you?"

"J. A. I'm not sure how it got started - clearly short for my first and middle names - Jonathon Alexander."

"Tell me about your childhood. Where were you born, for instance?"

"Lancaster. I was born in Lancaster. Mother was a secretary and dad owned a gas station. I had one younger brother, Charlie."

My heart began pounding. I wanted to run. My breathing became heavy. My palms and forehead started sweating. I felt dizzy but was compelled to sit up.

"It is distressing to think back to that time in your life. Why would that be?"

For a fleeting moment, I hated her - BM - for that question but it passed just as rapidly.

"Yes, it is distressing. I killed my little brother."

I began sobbing uncontrollably. The doctor just allowed me to cry it through. She furnished a box of tissues. (There would be an entrepreneurial coup - get a corner on tissue sales to all the members of the American Psychological Association.)

I smiled at the strange thought.

"What?" she asked, clearly perplexed though genuinely interested.

I shook my head and waved it off.

"Later, perhaps. My mind works in strange ways

sometimes.”

//“Tell me about it!\

We chuckled and she continued.

“You need to talk about how that death came about, you understand.”

I nodded and swallowed hard, drying the last vestiges of tears from my cheeks. I took a deep breath. With every word, I began understanding more about what had been happening to me.

“I was seven and Charlie was five. We had spent the weekend camping out at the Green County Campground. It had been a wonderful time. We laughed a lot. We played ball and tag and climbed trees. We sang - enthusiastically off key - around the fire at night and cozied together in the tent at bedtime. Dad provided horsey rides and Mom fixed all the foods we loved but seldom were allowed to have at home.

“I was a tease. I suppose I always had been. Rather than physically pounding the younger boy who had usurped so much of my parents’ attention after his arrival, I pestered him unmercifully. On the way home from the campground - we had just started down the hill - I reached over and undid Charlie’s seatbelt knowing full well I’d get a wonderful rise out of him. As was his fully predictable style, he screamed his prolonged, shrill, scream. Dad and Mom both turned and looked to see what had happened. In the confusion, the car careened off the cliff and Charlie was killed.

“My family never laughed again. There were no more horsey back rides. There were often unexplained tears in my parents’ eyes. It was forbidden to ever speak Charlie’s name in our home. I was never again snuggled in their laps and goodnight was said from the distance of the doorway - no longer with a kiss and a nose nuzzling and a tucking in. Charlie’s bed was remade every time mine was. His sheets were washed when mine were. He became a ghost in my room - in my life.

“I was separated from my parents - not so much physically as emotionally. I clearly understood why. I was a bad person. I accepted the consequences of my terrible deed and never again sought the solace or comfort of my parents. I was so bad that I could not stand in the presence of God. I’m

not certain if that was my original concept or if it came as I eavesdropped on one of my parents, private, always tearful, bedtime, conversations. We never returned to church.

“A few years later Dad died. Mother was devastated. He had been her only real friend. She needed me more than ever. I needed her more than ever. She still couldn’t include me in her life and I would not intrude on hers. We lived out those next few years’ side by side as two very sad people, distant and needy. I needed to make amends but Dad was gone and Mom recoiled from my every advance. There were never any words of forgiveness. I was never allowed to apologize. There were just the sad, empty, sighs as they looked at Charlie’s picture or touched his empty bed.

“They were good people. They didn’t understand what they were doing to me. They couldn’t see beyond their own grief. Their mourning never ceased. I was no longer a precious gift but the instrument of their greatest sadness.

“I knew all that - at least at an emotional level. I was helpless to rectify it. It would seem that a few weeks ago, it finally caught up with me - got the best of me. What is the date today, anyway?”

“May thirtieth. Happy Birthday.”

“It can’t be May thirtieth. My appointment was for April nineteenth,” I said, puzzled.

“That was your first appointment, John. This is your thirteenth.”

“I’ve lost six weeks,” I said.

“No,” she replied in that wonderfully reassuring voice. “You’ve found your life.”

I sat back and sighed.

“I have some questions, then.”

“Certainly.”

“I hold this growing glimmer of a memory about living in terror - blackmail, threats, loneliness, guns, a wreck - a recent wreck, a video tape, an apartment, a cabin, a murder.”

“It seems that for a period of about ten days you experienced a form of dissociation.”

“Multiple personalities?”

“Not really or you couldn’t have bounced back so quickly.

It was more like multiple or parallel lives. Although you maintained your regular life with your family, you also lived in a firmly fixed fantasy life. It is beautifully recorded here in this journal you kept.”

She picked it up from the table and handed it to me. I took it in trembling hands. It felt comfortable there - familiar, though I did not recognize it.

She continued.

“Although your family members were aware something was wrong, you kept it so well hidden and functioned at such a high level when you were with them that they never became overly concerned. In fact, it was you, not them, who set up that first appointment - as Pete, which you seem to remember. I assume you will gradually begin remembering the others along with all the intervening days and activities.

“It is such a strange period to look back on,” I said. “I can’t remember my life with my family nor can I remember all the details of the parallel life I led.”

“If you want the real kicker, your parallel life centered around your amnesia about the week you had been on vacation.”

I smiled.

“Amnesia in the midst of amnesia. Seems I packed quite a bit into a few weeks.”

She smiled back and nodded.

“What else is on your mind?” she asked.

“I have some flashes - I guess from my time as Pete. Pete who?”

“Peter Alexander an interesting rearranging of your name.”

“I remember thinking I was a writer. Am I a writer?”

“You have several full-length manuscripts that you’ve just never submitted for publication. They’re really good. You don’t seem to be able to accept that. I hope you will reconsider - along with that journal, perhaps. It is a one of a kind study of guilt and despair.”

I held the journal close against my chest as I went on - close like a child with his blankie in the midst of some crisis.

“Murder. I recall being blackmailed over some murder.”

"Think it through for yourself," she encouraged.

"Well, I supposedly killed someone at the time I had a car wreck. I guess it was at that same spot where Charlie was killed - though I'm sure I didn't recognize that. He was the little Fête pest in my neighborhood. Yes, I remember more. I was blackmailed about it by someone who seemed to know a great deal about me. Someone named - oh, my! - Johnny. I was taking retribution on myself, wasn't I? And BM - pardon the expression - BM said I had 'buried' the victim. I suppose that is some subconscious reference to the fact Charlie became a nonentity in my home."

"Very good. Is there more?"

"Yes. Yes!"

It was a suddenly exciting adventure.

"BM said it was all recorded on video tape - no, on grey videotape. I don't get that."

"Where was that terrible tragedy recorded for you?" she asked.

"Where? Recorded? For me? In my mind, I suppose. Oh! In my 'grey matter' - my 'grey video tape'. Pretty sneaky this mind of mine."

"And what about your recent accident? What do you now make of that?"

"Well, let's see. I remember that my examination of the scene led me to believe the gas had been drained from the tank so the car couldn't explode or catch fire. It was as if something else was not supposed to burn. I am now quite sure I was not in the car as it went over the cliff. I even found shoe skid marks trailing down the side of the hill to the car - mine, I feel sure. Perhaps I even remember that now. In the front seat was a back pack - mine from grade school. In it were pictures of Charlie and me and some . . . some of Charlie's most beloved toys. But why do that?"

"Perhaps it was a symbolic reenactment in which you were the one who, the second time around, was Charlie's protector. You saw to it that he was not harmed that time. You drove a nail hole into the gas tank so the car would not burn or explode. The seat belt was secure around him - well around the closest things you could find to represent him."

"Wow. A well plotted story, written entirely in my subconscious and acted out in an amnesic fit."

"Episode, might be better than fit," she said.

"A rose by any other name . . ." I returned. She nodded and hitched her shoulder. I continued.

"Aside from Carolyn - who showed up quite late in the scenario as I recall - there were only two beings I related to as friends - Cat and Cactus. Are they real or imaginary?"

"It is fascinating to me that you took with you into your rehabilitative fantasy, the six beings that you loved the most in your real life. It was probably your devotion to them that brought you back - Carolyn, Adam, Bruce, Grampa Grumps (Carolyn's father), Cactus (who is alive, undamaged and still yellow), and Cat."

"This may put me right back on your couch, Doctor, but you know which one of those I want to see the most right now?"

"Certainly. Cat!"

"Yes. How in the World?"

"Read your diary and you can't miss it. Cat represents the needy little boy that still resides inside you. The little boy who wished so for unconditional love and attention on demand - for status and a guaranteed, safe and dependable place in the world. Just for an added measure of security you gave Cat a second source of protection and sustenance - just on the 'Chance' he might need it. It's okay that he's there. We all carry our own younger versions around forever."

"So, my image of Cat torturing the mouse was a disguised reflection of how I teased - tortured - Charlie?"

"It is an interesting analogy. I hadn't put that part together, but yes, very likely - and very good by the way. You were, of course, just interested in getting a rise out him - making him momentarily mad - and not inflicting any long-term harm to him."

"And Cat is real, then?"

"On your lap every evening, the way I hear it - he goes by the name Socrates in your real life."

I nodded but was somehow certain that he would answer to the name *Cat!*

"So, in my fantasy life, it was I who did all those things to

myself - the notes, the calls, the apartment damage. No wonder BM always knew about everything. Did I really want to kill myself?"

"Look at the dichotomy you established. Final retribution vs. setting things right. I believe you only really sought ways to make amends to others - threat motivated, of course. Your parents had never allowed it. When guilt can be assuaged short of death, suicide seldom occurs. Of course, there was no way to undo the death of Charlie. With the reenactment of the accident you tried. I really don't know how that might have played out. I have faith in your basic reverence for life, however - others as well as your own. You are a NICE person, you know."

I had to smile. It was nice to receive outside verification of that.

"My trips back to Lancaster?"

"It appears you did make both of the ones reported in your journal."

"Jake?"

"Apparently, a real hitchhiker - just a hitchhiker."

"Father O'Malley?"

"Alive and well. He was never missing. That portion was played out inside your mind. The visit to the cemetery was real. You remember about that, now, don't you?"

I hadn't but it quickly revealed itself.

"Yes. It was a visit to Charlie's grave. I remember as a boy I would sneak off to visit there. It was both out of duty and to reconfirm that he was dead - not a ghost in my room. I probably talked to him more after he was dead than before. I kept him up to date on family things. I cried there about dad's death. It was the only place tears would come. Strangely, Charlie became my best friend and confidant."

"That worked for you *and* against you of course," she said.

I must have looked puzzled as she explained.

"You found a friend with whom you could talk and emote and that was good. However, that constructed a situation in which you had not only killed your brother (in your way of thinking) but also your best friend."

It made sense. A double whammy! The force of two specters working against my sanity.

“Chance, I suppose, was old Willy Grayson.”

She nodded.

“Was the bump on my head real? It certainly felt real, though now it seems to be gone.”

“Your boys report that you and they were washing cars the Saturday before your ‘journey’ began, and during some horseplay you slipped and fell backwards hitting your head on the front fender.”

“That explains the bump being on the back of my head.”

“Yes. It was so painful that you couldn’t ignore it even in your deep fantasy life. It became a part of the mystery that was not intended to be there. It must have been quite confusing.”

“It was all so confusing; I guess that any one thing just didn’t tend to stand out. What about Popo? I broke him, I understand that. I suppose it symbolized something. Perhaps my symbol of happiness or some treasure I didn’t deserve to possess.”

“Either or both, I imagine. As interesting to me as the broken limbs, was the face on which you changed the clown’s smile to a frown - as if dismembering it was not enough. Its symbolic nature also had to be erased.”

“If he’s still around I think I’ll glue him back together and repaint his face. Anything too morbid about that.”

“Actually, you’ve already done it. I understand he now stands on your office desk as happy as ever.”

“He was clearly important to me, I guess. I hadn’t realized.”

She nodded apparently feeling that ground had been sufficiently covered.

“The two, ever evasive faces were of Charlie and Me. They came from a picture that sat on my mother’s dresser. The grating sounds and the screams and crying probably harkened back to the moments during that first crash. I hope I can find that picture among mother’s things. I’d like to have that on my desk as well, now.”

Again, a nod and smile, then quiet.

“At one point, I seemed concerned that my victim may

have been my mother. I remember referring to her passing as having been a slow death. Slow death? She was gone in a matter of a month from when she was diagnosed.”

“Move beyond her physical death,” the doctor suggested.

“Oh. You mean her emotional death which slowly ate away at her, year after year. Yes. I suppose that was a slow death. Now I understand that wasn’t my fault. It had not been my intention to hurt anyone - certainly not to kill Charlie or to decimate my family. We all have tragedies in our lives. It was she who was unable to cope. Either we can cope or we cannot. I was not responsible for the fact she had not acquired appropriate coping skills during her life time. Her reaction to the event was not my fault. Her prolonged and exaggerated unhappiness is not on my shoulders.”

“And had you understood that at the outset, much of this would have been avoided.”

“I’m still confused about the reason for my visit to Father O’Malley and the gift of the baseball.”

“Think about what you said earlier about apologizing and forgiveness.”

“That I had never been allowed to apologize, you mean?”

“And . . .”

“And I have never received my parent’s forgiveness - only seemingly eternal blame. So, I - or more probably the Catholic little boy who I was back then - needed to go back to his roots and receive absolution in some formal way. I chose father O’Malley because he was always so comfortable. He was going to provide the means for my forgiveness - confession - so I felt the need to provide him with something in return - the ball and my sincere message of thanks.”

“Does that wrap it up for you, John?”

“Yes. I think it does. That religious demon set in place early in my life is - or at least was - tremendously powerful, wasn’t it?”

“All early teachings hang around deep inside until one takes the necessary steps to sort through them and delete those that are unhelpful and harmful. I believe you have been able to accomplish that during these past six weeks. I only wish

you had started in a more open and systematic way years ago. As you said, your parents missed your hurt and suffering as they selfishly tended only to their own.”

“Now I have to be concerned about what hurtful directives I may have unwittingly buried in my own sons’ deep minds. I’m sure I have. So much of parenting is hit and miss, and so often directed by our own, poorly executed - or willy-nilly - upbringing. We’ll need to make arrangements for them to begin the sorting process soon so they can enter adulthood unencumbered by those left-over goblins. I would have never hurt them intentionally, you know.”

“Oh, yes, ‘Mr. Nice’. I do know that. I’ll be glad to help them get started on that when they are ready. In the meantime, they can begin with this book.”

She handed me a copy of, *Deep Mind Mastery*.

I took it and nodded. If all of this would serve to help move Adam and Bruce toward a healthier adulthood, it was worth every second of torment I went through. Parenthood - well, genuinely, human parenthood - is like that. There is nothing you wouldn’t do to protect and assist your children. That is a wonderful arrangement. Some, of course, would point to that as proof of the supernatural influence. I am content to stop at the point of saying how wonderful it is that the human species has developed in that way. It is undoubtedly that single trait that has protected and preserved mankind this long. But I am digressing from my report of the thirteenth session.

My reluctance to deal with myself as a parent represented my deep-seated fear that, like my own parents, I might unknowingly wreak havoc on my children. I became rather open about that in my parallel life. It’s good to have disinterred it so I can work through those uncertainties.

One of the more puzzling and disturbing, ongoing elements of my ‘time away’ came to mind.

“The green hats? I have to know about the green hats. What possible, deeply hidden, significance could they have had?”

“The Springfield Green Demons. Ring a bell?”

“The high school colors - mascot - teams. Of course,. No wonder those hats popped up everywhere around town.”

“Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, you know,” she said referring to an oft quoted remark attributed to Sigmund Freud in his later days.

Finally, I have to ask. “Is it over then?”

“I’d bet my considerable reputation on it. In fact, I am doing just that. You’re dismissed. Feel free to make occasional appointments as you feel the need. There is still quite a bit for you to readjust to. With your wonderful, loving and supportive wife and sons, I doubt that you’ll really need me, however. I do, however, have one more piece of crucial advice for you. It is exceedingly important so listen with great care.”

I was again puzzled.

“What’s that?” I inched forward on my seat to give it my full attention. Her tone became hushed and she leaned toward me in a confidential manner.

“Be prepared, as you enter your home this evening, for the biggest surprise birthday party of your life!”

She had been pulling my leg.

“Ah ha! The silly string!”

Dr. Mathias merely shrugged her shoulders, allowing me my wonderful private thought.

“Well, I thank you for the heads up on that and I certainly thank you for giving me my real life and family back.”

I stood and shook her hand, momentarily wondering how I could ever be certain this was the true reality. I shook it off - for the moment.

“And the children at the homeless shelter and I want to thank you.” She said. “I don’t believe I ever got around to that.”

“I don’t understand.” I was bewildered.

“For the two thousand dollars you sent after Cindy told you about our need for cribs and toys.”

“So, that’s where the missing two G’s went! You are entirely welcome. I’ll do what I can along.”

“Now I have a question,” Dr. Mathias said.

“You? Sure!”

“Why would you make your contribution in cash rather than by check? Cash is so hard to justify as a gift on tax forms. If it hadn’t arrived in an envelope from your Bookshop, I’d have never guessed its source.”

I smiled.

“My philosophy of ‘charity’ may seem strange but I believe that a gift can never be true charity if you use it in any way to enhance yourself. My contributions are usually anonymous. If I take credit it’s really just to puff myself up and that’s NOT charity in my book. I feel the same about taking it as a tax deduction - not really charity if I benefit in that way.”

“An exceptionally altruistic philosophy, Mr. Peterson. You’ve taught me as much as I’ve taught you, through all of this.”

Discovering where the money had gone was a nice loose end to have tied up in such a nice way for a recently certified nice man to boot! (No more multiple punctuation marks - how nice!)

“I have one final question that seems extremely important for me to answer.”

“Yes.”

“During that parallel life. Was I slipping closer and closer to some permanent level of insanity?”

“Quite the opposite, really. It was as if, through the years, your guilt-driven mind had gradually slipped as close to the brink as it dared - and somehow it seemed to know that. The ‘purpose’ of your suddenly born parallel life as Peter was not to send you deeper into insanity. It was more . . . how should I characterize it? It was more about helping you climb your way back toward a fully recovered, disturbance-free reality. It was your Deep Mind’s self-induced form of therapy. Near the end, the illusory life you had created began giving way - falling apart. You could not recall faces and voices you had invented. Even the apartment and your cabin in the woods, which you had created as your safe havens, began appearing to feel somehow wrong, strange, and out of place - unreal, if you will. Examine the notes you wrote; the signature ‘- Johnny’, gradually changed from being the name of the writer, into the person to whom the comments had been addressed. No longer, F“- Johnny” the signature, but “, Johnny,” the person being addressed.

“No, it wasn’t a case of Peter Alexander in search of the problem-numbing solution we call insanity. It was more a case

*of Sanity in Search of Peter Alexander.”*