Lost Boy Lost Girl

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A new psychological thriller from the co-author of the massive international No 1 bestseller BLACK HOUSE.From the ferocious imagination of Peter Straub springs a nerve-shredding new chiller about the persistence of evil.A woman kills herself for no apparent reason. A week later, her teenage son disappears. The vanished boy's uncle, Tim Underhill, returns to his home town of Millhaven to discover what he can. A madman known as the Sherman Park Killer has been haunting the neighbourhood, but Underhill believes that Mark's obsession with a local abandoned house is at the root of his disappearance. He fears that Mark came across its last and greatest secret – a lost girl, one who has coaxed Mark deeper and deeper into her mysterious domain. Only by following in their footsteps will Underhill uncover the shocking truth.

Содержание

PETER STRAUB
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Dedication

For Charles Bernstein and Susan Bee

Epigraph

There was set before me a mighty hill
And long days I climbed
Through regions of snow.
When I had before me the summit-view,
It seemed that my labours
Had been to see gardens
Lying at impossible distances.
– STEPHEN CRANE
What was at stake here, he thought, was the solidity of the world.
– TIMOTHY UNDERHILL, *The Divided Man*

Contents

Part One THE DEAD MOTHER

1

NANCY UNDERHILL'S DEATH had been unexpected, abrupt – a death like a slap in the face. Tim, her husband's older brother, knew nothing more. He could scarcely be said really to have known Nancy. On examination, Timothy Underhill's memories of his sister-in-law shrank into a tiny collection of snapshots. Here was Nancy's dark, fragile smile as she knelt beside her two-year-old son, Mark, in 1990; here she was, in another moment from that same visit, snatching up little Mark, both of them in tears, from his baby seat and rushing from the dim unadorned dining room. Philip, whose morose carping had driven his wife from the room, sat glaring at the dried-out pot roast, deliberately ignoring his brother's presence. When at last he looked up, Philip said, 'What?'

Ah Philip, you were ever a wonder. *The kid can't help being a turd*, Pop said once. *It seems to be one of the few things that make him feel good*.

One more of cruel memory's snapshots, this from an odd, eventful visit Tim had paid to Millhaven in 1993, when he flew the two and a half hours from La Guardia on the same carrier, and from all available evidence also the same craft, as this day: Nancy seen through the screen door of the little house on Superior Street, beaming as she hurried Tim-ward down the unlighted hallway, her face alight with the surprise and pleasure given her by the unexpected arrival on her doorstep of her brother-in-law ('famous' brother-in-law, she would have said). She had, simply, *liked* him, Nancy had, to an extent he'd understood only at that moment.

That quietly stressed out little woman, often (Tim thought) made wretched by her husband and sewn into her marriage by what seemed determination more than love, as if the preparation of many thousands of daily meals and a succession of household 'projects' provided most of the satisfaction she needed to keep her in place. Of course Mark must have been essential; and maybe her marriage had been happier than Tim imagined. For both their sakes, he hoped it had been.

Philip's behavior over the next few days would give him all the answers he was likely to get. And with Philip, *interpretation* was always necessary. Philip Underhill had cultivated an attitude of discontent ever since he had concluded that his older brother, whose flaws shone with a lurid radiance, had apparently seized from birth most of the advantages available to a member of the Underhill clan. From early in his life, nothing Philip could get or achieve was quite as good as it would have been but for the mocking, superior presence of his older brother. (In all honesty, Tim did not doubt that he had tended to lord it over his little brother. Was there ever an older brother who did not?) During all of Philip's adult life, his grudging discontent had been like a role perfectly inhabited by an actor with a gift for the part: somewhere inside, Tim wanted to believe, the real Philip must have lived on, capable of joy, warmth, generosity, selflessness. It was this inner, more genuine self that was going to be needed in the wake of Nancy's mysterious death. Philip would need it for his own sake if he were to face his grief head-on, as grief had to be faced; but more than that, he would need it for his son. It would be terrible for Mark if his father somehow tried to treat his mother's death as yet another typical inconvenience different from the rest only by means of its severity.

From what Tim had seen on his infrequent returns to Millhaven, Mark seemed a bit troubled, though he did not wish to think of his nephew in the terms suggested by the word 'troubled.' Unhappy, yes; restless; unfocused; afflicted with both a budding arrogance and what Tim had perceived was a good and tender heart. A combination so conflicted lent itself naturally to restlessness and lack of focus. So, as far as Tim remembered, did being fifteen years old. The boy was trim and compact, physically more like his mother than his father: dark-haired and dark-eyed – though presently his hair was clipped so short its color was merely some indeterminate shade of darkness – with a broad forehead and a narrow, decisive chin. Two steel rings rode the outer ridges of his right ear. He slopped around in big T-shirts and oversized jeans, alternately grimacing and grinning at the music earphoned into his head from an improbably tiny device, an iPod or an MP3 player. Mark was devoted to a

strange cross section of contemporary music: Wilco, the Magnetic Fields, the White Stripes, the Strokes, Yo La Tengo, Spiritualized, and the Shins, but also Bruce Springsteen, Jimmy LaFave, and Eminem, whom he seemed to appreciate in an ironic spirit. His 'pin-up girl,' he had informed his uncle in an e-mail, was Karen O of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

In the past sixteen months, Mark had e-mailed his uncle four times, not so briefly as to conceal a tone Tim found refreshing for being sidelong, sweet, and free of rhetorical overkill. Mark's first and longest e-mail used the excuse of a request for advice, Tim thought, as a way to open communications between them.

From: munderhill697@aol.com
To: tunderhill@nyc.rr.com
Sent: Sunday, February 3, 2002 4:06 PM
Subject: speak, o wise one
hi de ho

this is your nephew mark in case u couldn't decipher the from line. so I was having this lil disagreement with my father, and I wanted 2 ask your advice. after all u managed 2 get out of this burg & travel around & u write books & u live in nyc & all that means u shd have a pretty open mind. I hope it does.

bcuz u & u alone will decide what i do next. my dad sez he will go along with u no matter what. I dunno maybe he doesn't want 2 have 2 decide. (mom sez, quote, don't ask me, I don't want to hear abt it, unquote. that's what mom sez.)

i turn 14 next month and 2 celebrate my bday I'd like 2 get a tongue piercing. 1 of my friends has a pierced tongue and he sez it isn't 2 painful at all and its over in a jiff. I'd really like 2 do this. don't u think 14 is the rite age 2 go out and do something dumb, provided u do think it is dumb to pierce your tongue, which I obviously do not? in a year or 2 I'll take it out & go back 2 being boring & normal. or what d'you say, move up 2 a cool tat?

waiting 2 hear from the famous unk
m

From: tunderhill@nyc.rr.com
To: munderhill697@aol.com
Sent: Sunday, February 3, 2002 6:32 PM
Subject: Re: speak, o wise one
Dear Mark,

First of all, it is wonderful to hear from you! Let's do this more often. I like the idea of our being in touch.

I've been thinking about your question. To begin with, I'm flattered that you thought to ask my opinion on such a personal matter. I'm also flattered that your father placed the decision in my hands, but I suppose he really did not want to think about his son having his tongue pierced! If I had a son, I wouldn't want to think about it, either.

bcuz, as u wld say, the idea of tongue piercings makes me feel a bit queasy. I like your earrings and I think they look good on you, but whenever I see some young person with a metal ball riding on top of his/her tongue, I begin to fret about the discomfort of such an arrangement. Doesn't it complicate the whole eating business? I almost hate to admit this to you, but to me tongue piercings really do seem like weird self-mutilation. So you are far ahead of me in this regard.

This is not the answer you were expecting, I'm sure. I'm sorry to stand in the way of you getting what you want, but you asked and I had to answer you truthfully. I'd rather think of you without a metal ball in your mouth than with one. Sorry, kiddo, but I love you anyhow.

Is there anything special you'd like me to get for your birthday? Maybe I can make up for being so boring and middle-class.

Uncle Tim

The next day two messages from his family turned up in his Inbox.

From: munderhill697@aol.com

To: tunderhill@nyc.rr.com

Sent: Monday, February 4, 2002 7:32 AM

Subject: Re: speak, o wise one

TYim, this is nme Philip using Mark's computyer. Hje showed me what you wrote him. I hadf the feeling you'd do the right thing for once. So, well, thanks. IO hate that crap too.

From: munderhill697@aol.com

To: tunderhill@nyc.rr.com

Sent: Monday, February 4, 2002 5:31 PM

Subject: Re: speak, o wise one

>Is there anything special you'd like me to get for your birthday? now that you mention it, yep. ordnance. :)

m

For once, as his brother would put it, Tim was grateful for the Internet's assumption that its users were incapable of perceiving a joke unaccompanied by a nudge in the ribs. Philip's error-riddled message contained a different kind of reassurance – that of its having been sent at all.

During Pop's life, the brothers had come together – meaning that Tim flew to Millhaven from New York – once or twice a year; in the five years since his death, they had scarcely spoken. Pop had come to New York once, as a widower of two years in his late seventies, saying that he wanted to see what all the fuss was about, and he had stayed in Tim's loft at 55 Grand Street, which he had found awkward and discomfiting. His knees made the trek up and down three flights of stairs difficult, and Tim had overheard him complain to dear Michael Poole, who lived one floor up with the amazing and equally dear Maggie Lah, that he had imagined his son was at least rich enough to put in an elevator. ('I used to run an elevator, you know,' he told Michael. 'At the famous St Alwyn Hotel, right there in Pigtown. All the big musicians stayed there, niggers included.') The next day, at an informal little get-together Tim put together with Maggie Lah, Michael Poole, and Vinh Tran, who with Maggie owned and operated Saigon, the Vietnamese restaurant on the ground floor of 55 Grand Street, Pop turned to Michael and said, 'You know something, Doctor? As far as I'm concerned, the whole world can blow up right soon's I die, and I wouldn't give a damn. Why should I?'

'Doesn't Tim's brother have a son?' Michael asked. 'Don't you care what happens to your grandchild?'

'Not a hell of a lot.'

'You a tough ol' coot, aren't you?' Maggie said.

Pop grinned at her. Vodka had loosened him up to the point where he supposed this stunning Chinese woman could see through the cobwebby disguise of old age to the seductive rascal he was at heart. 'I'm glad someone down here in New York City is smart enough to understand me,' he said.

Tim realized he had read through three pages of the new George Pelecanos novel without registering anything more than individual words. He looked up the aisle to discover that the flight attendants handing out the wrapped lunches were only two rows in front of him. On Midwest Air, a one-class airline noted for its wide seats and attentive service, the approach of the in-flight meal could still arouse some interest.

A blond woman with a Smithsonian-quality Millhaven accent handed him a wrapped chicken Caesar salad, more than acceptable by airline standards, and a minute later her twin sister filled his Midwest Air wine glass a quarter of an inch above the line with a decent cabernet, and when he had taken a sip and let it slide down his throat, it came to Tim Underhill that for the past twenty minutes, when he was supposed to be enjoying George Pelecanos as a kind of palate cleanser before making notes for his new and highly uncharacteristic project, he had been engaged in the fruitless task of obsessing about his brother.

If he actually did intend to accomplish any work during this trip, which in spite of everything he hoped he might, he was going to have to stop brooding about his brother and dedicate at least some of his attention to a surprisingly little known figure in American life, Dr Herman Mudgett, a.k.a. H. H. Holmes. Probably the country's first serial killer and undoubtedly one of its most prolific, Mudgett had adopted the surname of a famous fictional detective and constructed in Chicago a monstrous murder palace in the form of a hotel just in time to siphon off young women in town to attend the 1893 Columbian Exposition. In his vast hotel, he killed almost every woman who became involved with him to a degree greater than serving him breakfast in a local restaurant or selling him collars and cravats at the haberdashery. LD Bechtel, a young musician of Tim's acquaintance, had suggested that they collaborate on a chamber opera about Holmes, and for the past two months this project had occupied a portion of his thoughts.

He knew when he had first begun to see his own access into it. The moment had been the result of various unrelated objects producing a small but vital electrical pulse when accidentally joined together. He had gone out to loaf through the St Mark's Bookshop and pick up a cup of coffee at Starbucks, and the first element of his inspiration had been an odd slogan stenciled atop a high, rounded Spring Street gutter passed on his eastward trek. The stencil had just been applied, and the ink glistened. It consisted of four words, all lowercase: *lost boy lost girl*. Downtown indierock bands sometimes advertised themselves by stenciling their names on sidewalks, and Tim had known of a couple of small presses that did the same with titles of books they did not have the money otherwise to promote. He supposed that somewhere, someone had done it with a movie title. Whatever it was, he liked the phrase and hoped he would remember to notice where it might crop up again.

In St Mark's Bookshop, he cruised the New Fiction tables and pulled a copy of John Ashbery's *Chinese Whispers* from a poetry shelf. Any new book by John Ashbery was an automatic purchase. At a big table stacked with oversized art books, he picked up a jumbo-sized collection of Magritte paintings, opened it at random, and found himself looking for maybe the hundredth time at a painting called *Not to Be Reproduced*, in which a young man with a fine head of hair stands, his back to the painter and the viewer, looking into a mirror that reproduces, instead of his face, the back of his head. He is looking at an image of himself that looks away from him. Because his face is not visible, the young man has no face.

Then it happened: Tim felt the unmistakable tingle of the little electrical pulse and told himself that he was looking at a portrait of H. H. Holmes. His access, his way in, was a kind of feel, a kind of tone – the feeling aroused in him by the Magritte painting. As a painting, it was a virtual Chinese whisper, or could be seen that way, always leaning toward a further misprision. It was one of the *creepiest* of all surrealist paintings, and the feelings it awakened in him had all to do with dread. Tim could see their H. H. Holmes, his and LD's, before the furnace in which he had incinerated his victims, his back to the audience, singing his lungs out and posed more like an icon than a man. The image contained a kind of splendor that all but brought its music into audibility. With his inner ear, Tim could hear their little orchestra hammering and beating away, and it sounded gorgeous. *We're going to do this*, he said to himself.

When he passed Spring Street on his way home, he looked down to see the enigmatic *lost boy lost girl*, but the slogan had disappeared, as though the fresh ink had melted into the smooth concrete of the curb. *Impossible*, he thought, *I'm on the wrong corner*. It was not the wrong corner, he knew, but for three or four blocks he kept looking at the curb, and abandoned the search only when he began to feel foolish.

Now it came to him that he was going back to a city perfectly attuned to his project. Millhaven had struck him as essentially surreal ever since he had left it for the first time. Nancy Underhill would have had no appetite for the surreal. She had been required to stand up to Philip for the decade and a half when they had skulked from neighborhood to neighborhood until returning to within two blocks of the house on Auer Avenue where Timothy and Philip were born to Mom and Pop Underhill.

Had something in the scruffy old part of the city once known as Pigtown, with its two-story houses burdened with dark, suspicious-looking porches, its tiny sloping lawns and narrow alleyways, the ugly rows of liquor stores, diners, and cheap clothing outlets on its avenues, reached out for funny little Nancy Underhill and taken her life? Had some *person* from that world killed her?

His next thought shamed Tim even as it formed itself into coherence: his brother's wife had seemed almost too self-effacing, you could say too unimportant, to get murdered.

Forty minutes before the plane set down, the rich, delicious smell of chocolate-chip cookies baking golden brown filled the cabin. Midwest Air served freshly baked chocolate-chip cookies on every flight long enough to include a meal. Ten minutes later, the flight attendant leaned toward him and, winking, handed over a paper napkin holding three warm cookies, one more than the usual ration. She smiled at him.

'Do you know who was in your seat on yesterday's flight?'

He shook his head.

'That actor who was in *Family Ties*.'

'Michael J. Fox?'

'No, the one who played his father.' She looked away for a second. 'He must be really old by now. He still looks pretty good, though.'

Tim raised the first cookie to his mouth. Its wonderful fragrance seemed to move directly into the center of his head, making him ravenous. What was the name of that actor, anyhow? Michael somebody: he'd had a nice quality, like Alan Alda without the smarm. The cryptic phrase stenciled on a Spring Street curb came back to him. *lost boy lost girl*.

How on earth, he wondered, had Nancy died?

2

THE OBITUARY NOTICE in that morning's *Ledger* told him nothing but Nancy's age, family details, and funeral information. There was no photograph. For Nancy's sake, Tim felt grateful. He had known his sister-in-law at least well enough to feel sure that she would have hated having the only photograph of her to appear in the city newspaper run after her death. Tim looked again at the obituary's few column inches and realized that it had been published four days after Nancy's death. Wasn't that later than usual? Perhaps not. And it contained nothing about the cause of death but the words 'without warning.' *Without warning* Nancy Kalendar Underhill, wife to Philip, mother to Mark, a resident of 3324 North Superior Street in Millhaven's Sherman Park district, had been taken from her devoted family and loving friends. Without warning had she laid down her spatula and mixing bowl, stripped off her comely apron, straightened her arms by her sides, and zoomed away from the surface of the earth at a nice, sharp forty-five-degree angle.

Tim experienced a peculiar tumult in the region of his heart. Yes, that was exactly what Nancy had done. The shock of the recognition made him go to the edge of the bed and sit down, fast. Of her own volition had Nancy shot rocketlike off the planet. Philip's wife and Mark's mother had killed herself. Now Tim understood how he could have failed to grasp the situation from the beginning. Philip's voice, Philip's words had thwarted him. The voice sounded tamped down, flattened out to stifle any emotion that might shine through: Philip with someone standing on his throat. That had been Philip, standing on his own throat. Philip would be happiest if Tim were never to learn that Nancy had not died in her sleep. He would feel that the knowledge meant a personal loss, that some degree of power had been transferred into his brother's hands. The tight, stepped-on voice therefore had divulged as little information as possible. *I thought you should know that Nancy unexpectedly passed away yesterday afternoon. It happened very suddenly, and I guess you could say I'm in shock. In shock. Probably will be for a while, huh? You don't have to tell me right away, but let me know if you want to come here for the viewing on Friday and the funeral and all that on Saturday afternoon.*

Philip might as well have been speaking to an answering machine.

I don't suppose you'll want to stay here, will you? When did you ever want to stay here?

Tim's heart trembled at the thought of what Mark must be going through.

He found that he was holding his hands clamped down over the top of his head, as if to keep this new information from bouncing around the hotel room, spattering blood as it went. Feeling like Philip, he lowered his hands and for a moment concentrated on his breathing. What could he say to his brother?

With this question came a great, dirty tide of misery and despair, at its center a piercing bolt of pain for Nancy Underhill, for how she must have felt in the weeks and days before. That was monstrous, obscene. Tim made up his mind on the spot: he would not leave Millhaven without knowing why Nancy had killed herself. It was as though she herself had given him the charge.

From Timothy Underhill's journal, 12 June 2003

I'm checked into the Pforzheimer, and just to make sure I realize that I am once again back in my hometown, Millhaven voices are rolling through my head. My nephew Mark's sweet e-mail voice; Philip's dour rumble. Even Pop's smoky rasp. In the midst of all these voices, why not listen to Nancy's, too?

Nancy's voice was soft, tennis-ball fuzzy. She once asked me, *How do you write a book, anyhow?* Heart in mouth, I said. She gave me a lovely laugh, her eyes half-closed. Nancy handled customer complaints for the Millhaven Gas Company. Philip, the vice principal of John Quincy Adams Junior High and High School ('Quincy'), wanted her to quit. He thought that having people yell at his wife all day was beneath him, though when you came down to it, the nuts and bolts of his job weren't all that different. That Nancy could be funny about her job annoyed Philip. If she was

going to insist on going to that office every day, at least she could have the decency to show its cost; that was Philip's point of view. *All day long, these ignorant black dumbbells are calling her 'mother-fucker,'* Philip had once stage-whispered to him. *Tell me you could take that every day.*

Philip, she had said, *they're not ignorant, they're not dumb, and they're certainly not all black. They're just afraid they'll freeze to death if they lose their gas. We work out a little deal, that's all.*

Do white people ever get that deal? Philip wanted to know.

That gas company job must have been difficult more often than not, but she kept showing up. At night, she cooked for Philip and Mark. Obviously, she did all the housework. A woman with two jobs then, and I bet she seldom complained. To a girl from Pigtown, Philip had seemed a good enough catch. A budding educator, he already wore a jacket and tie every day. Probably, Philip had opened up to her back then, probably showed her a little flash, a little soul, enough to convince her it would still be there in the years to come. Think of the long marriage afterward, think of how she endured the person he became. I remember the light in her eye as she hurried down the hall toward me, a glow I could see right through the screen door. A great capacity for feeling, then, starved, unused, except for her son.

I want to know why you killed yourself.

A fatal disease? Philip would have told me. A love affair gone wrong? Nancy was not so romantic, not so foolish. Some overwhelming shame? If not shame, then a deep guilt? Guilt for what? For something undone, some action unperformed – that felt like Nancy's brand of guilt.

Brave, steadfast, resigned, disappointed, true of heart, Nancy was all of these things. Poisoned by an old guilt – when she could have intervened, when she was needed, she stepped back, and the disaster happened. What else? Somewhere, I think, there's a lot of fear, a big *old* fear. She feared the cause of her guilt: she feared what had made her needed. Some person, some man, loomed back there in Nancy's life. He was terrifying.

This is where we locate Nancy's story: I can feel it stir.

I'm reminded of what sometimes happened to me in Bangkok during the late seventies – I sensed death, actual Death, capering behind me on the crowded street, sending before him as his sign or sigil a naked Vietnamese girl running through the Patpong circus, a girl showing her bloody palms to the world.

It's so tempting to give Nancy a history similar to mine. A grim creature peering in from just offstage; and with her we have someone she failed to rescue from the hideous Death-figure.

… For me, the naked Vietnamese girl represented a kind of salvation, the reawakening of my imagination; for her, it was only dread.

I'm not sure what I think about this. It feels right, but looked at objectively it seems too much a by-product of my own story. Not to mention my imagination.

Nancy's story – I wonder if I'll ever really get inside it, ever really *see* the beast that perched on her shoulder. But this is a start, maybe.

From this window on the fourth floor of the Pforzheimer's original building, Tim Underhill and Michael Poole once had looked down on wintry Jefferson Street as an infuriated motorist with a snowed-in car whipped his tire iron against the side of a bus moving slowly toward Cathedral Square. At the time, what they were looking at seemed like pure Millhaven.

The sparse traffic on Jefferson Street swam through the hot, languid air. Directly below, a Pforzheimer valet in a short-sleeved brown uniform lounged against a parking meter. Across the street, a hunched old man in a seersucker suit, a bow tie, and a straw hat, the image of prosperous old-school midwestern propriety, picked his way down the red stone steps of the Millhaven Athletic Club. Some retired judge or doctor going home after a bowl of tomato soup and a turkey club. At his back, the weathered red brick facade of the athletic club was sturdy, peaceful, traditional; although less sturdy, the old man looked much the same. Tim watched him ease himself off the last step and

down onto the sidewalk. He wondered where the doctor had parked his car. All the spaces in front of the club were empty.

Working his elbows as if in a hurry, the old party in the jaunty hat and the spiffy bow tie proceeded directly across the sidewalk. He glanced quickly from side to side, then hitched up his shoulders and stepped down into Jefferson Street. To Tim, he no longer looked so peaceful. For an old guy who had just finished lunch, he was moving with an awkward, herky-jerky haste.

Like a hideous dream-chariot, a long black car of antique design came rushing up the middle of Jefferson Street, heading straight toward the old man. Tim froze at his window; the retired doctor had more presence of mind. After a moment's hesitation, he backpedaled toward the curb, keeping an eye on the car racing toward him. The car corrected for his change of position. 'Get out of there, old man!' Tim said aloud, still unable to believe that he was watching an attempted murder. 'Go! *Move!*'

As the black car swung left toward the curb, the old man vaulted across three feet of roadway, came down on his toes, and started to run. The Pforzheimer's parking valet had disappeared. The black car slithered forward and sideways with the speed of a mongoose charging a cobra, and a straw hat sailed into the air. '*No!*' Underhill shouted, and rapped his forehead against the cool window. A seersucker shoulder and a white-haired head slid out of sight beneath the car.

Tim's breath misted the window.

Inexorably, the car ground over the roadbed. After a horrifically long second or two, it picked up speed and rolled toward Grand Avenue. The old man lay still on the concrete, his long legs drawn up and one arm outstretched. Tim tried unsuccessfully to catch the car's license number.

Hadn't anyone else seen the murder? Tim spun toward the telephone in his room, then moved back to check the scene again. Now the street was filled with people. Two men in loose-fitting jackets, one a dusty red, the other navy blue, stood by the driver's side of the car. The man in the navy blouson wore a long-billed black cap that covered half his face. Another man and a young woman had run up to the old man in the seersucker suit, and as Tim watched, they held out their hands, and the victim, not dead, not even injured, pulled himself upright. A young woman wearing a headset trotted through the little crowd with the straw hat in her hand. A man in a fedora and a pin-striped suit got out of the car, pointed back down the street, and nodded at something said by the man in the long-billed cap. He, too, wore a headset.

Tim pushed up the window and leaned out. The man in the seersucker suit, no longer quite so old, settled the boater back on his head and laughed at something said by the young woman. Most of the people on the street had begun to retreat to their positions. The black car was backing down Jefferson Street, where a bare-chested man in shorts rode sidesaddle beside an enormous camera set on miniature railroad tracks.

A visiting film company had transformed Jefferson Street into a movie set.

Tim watched the actor in the seersucker suit trot up the red stone steps of the Millhaven Athletic Club and duck into the doorway to await the next take. Once again, the street looked empty. In a couple of minutes the old man would reappear on the red steps, the long car would begin rolling, the man and the car would come into conjunction, and what looked like murder would again take place; this would happen over and over again until the light changed.

Tim closed the window and went to the telephone beside his journal on the busy writing table. When the desk clerk answered, he asked what was going on outside. 'I mean, is it a movie or a television episode?'

'A movie. Big-budget job. The director's somebody like Scorsese or Coppola, someone like that. The crew will be outside there another two days, and then they'll be shooting at a location down in the warehouse district.'

Tim remembered the warehouse district, a few blocks south of Grand, from when it still had warehouses and nobody called it anything at all. He also remembered a time when desk clerks at the

Pforzheimer would mean something entirely different when they used the word 'shooting.' 'Ah,' he said. 'Gas lamps and cobblestones. What is it, a Golden Days of the Mafia story?'

'Gangsters and tommy guns,' said the clerk. 'Whenever they want to set a movie in old-time Chicago, they come to Millhaven.'

Tim moved back to the window. Here came the actor in his retired doctor getup, jerking his shoulders and elbows as he hitched himself off the curb; here was that impression of haste. Now the black dream-mobile, which had running boards and a spare-tire well on the trunk, gathered speed as it cruised southward on Jefferson Street, which would not be Jefferson now but a street in Chicago, South Dearborn or South Clark. The actor froze, glided backward, broad-jumped forward; the car twitched like a living thing, and the straw boater sailed off. The actor disappeared beneath the antique car. This time, Tim was able to see the second camera dollying in, accompanied by the man in the long-billed black cap. This, too, had happened the first time, but Tim had seen none of it.

Idly, his gaze drifted northward to the trim little park beyond the club's parking lot. Angled paths intersected at a concrete circle with a wooden bench and a dead fountain. Beech trees cast angular shadows on the grass. An old woman scattered bread crumbs to several families of combative sparrows. At the top of the square, digital bells in the cathedral's tower tolled three times, sending out a dull *clang clang clang* that hung like bronze smoke in the bright air. Then an argument between two teenage boys proceeding toward the bottom of the square snagged his attention. The floppiness of their clothing, as alike as the dress of twins clothed by their parents – baggy jeans, oversized short-sleeved T-shirts (pale blue and navy blue) worn over oversized long-sleeved T-shirts (light yellow and dirty white) – heightened the vehemence of their gestures. At the bottom of the square they turned right and began moving toward the Pforzheimer, on the far side of Jefferson.

The taller of the two had cropped dark hair and shoulders so broad his arms seemed to swing at a distance greater than usual from his slim body. He was walking backward and waving his arms. The smaller boy, wider, rounder, and with long, sandy-reddish hair, had the resigned, rubbery face of a comedian, but Tim saw that his instinctive equanimity was strained to the breaking point. He kept slowing the pace, jamming his hands into the deep, low pockets of his capacious jeans, then raising them in a gesture that said, *What can I do? Sorry, I can't help you*. Dancing before him, the dark-haired boy seemed to be saying, *Man, I need you with me on this. Give me a break!* A pair of mimes could not have drawn the poles of their disagreement any more clearly, nor the passion of one and the resistance of the other. The tall boy stopped moving and clutched the sides of his head. Tim knew he was cursing and hoped he was not trying to coax his red-haired friend into some illegality. It did not look like that kind of dispute, exactly. Something crucial was at stake, but probably an advanced form of mischief, not a criminal charge. *Come on, we'll have a blast, it'll be great* versus *Give it up, there's no way I'm doing that, and I don't think you should do it, either*.

Tim thought he heard a wail of frustration and outrage.

The red-haired boy dodged around his gesticulating friend and continued up the sidewalk. The taller boy ran up to him and clouted his shoulder. Looking extraordinarily graceful in his pale blue and light yellow shirts, he shot out an arm and pointed at, or very near to, Tim Underhill's window. Instinctively, Tim stepped back. Almost immediately, he moved forward again, drawn by an unexpected recognition. The taller of the two boys was strikingly handsome, even beautiful, in a dark-browed, clean-featured manner. A second later, Tim Underhill's recognition system at last yielded the information that he was looking at his nephew, Mark. By a kind of generational enhancement, features that passed for pleasing but unremarkable in his mother emerged, virtually unchanged, as beautiful in her son. In all likelihood, Mark had no idea of how attractive he was.

The next message that came bubbling into consciousness was that just then Mark could have been speaking of him to his red-haired friend. Philip had probably mentioned that he would be in town for the funeral, and it would be like Philip to throw in a sneering reference to the Pforzheimer.

That Mark was probably speaking of him meant that Tim had some role in the dispute between the two boys. What sort of role, he wondered: advice, direction, decision?

Whatever his point had been, Mark – for it really *was* Mark, Tim saw – had decided to save his powder for another day's battle. That this was a truce, not surrender, was evident in his loping slouch, the ease of his stride, the wry set of his mouth. The red-haired boy spoke to him, and he shrugged in feigned indifference.

It almost hurt, that Mark should have become so beautiful – the world at large had already begun to conspire against the straightforward destiny that would otherwise have been his. Would you just look at him, down there on the sidewalk? He's pretending to be too tough to be wounded by his mother's death.

Both boys stopped moving to watch the man in the seersucker suit and straw hat once again come hitching down the red steps of the MAC. There was always something horrible about catching an actor at work, suddenly becoming aware that he was after all merely playing a role.

From Timothy Underhill's journal, 20 June 2003

Eight days after my last entry, and I must go back to Millhaven again. Philip told me that Mark has been missing for a couple of days, and he only called me *because he thought I might have been hiding him in my loft!* Really, he was furious, barely able to contain it. And though I resent his attitude, in all honesty I can't be angry with him or even really blame him very much for what he's been thinking.

From what I could make of Philip's rant, Mark vanished sometime in the evening of, I think, the 18th. Philip waited up for him until two in the morning, then retired in the reasonable certainty that before long Mark would be in his bed. In the morning, Mark's bed was still empty. Philip called the police, who informed him of what he already knew, that two other boys recently had disappeared from that part of town, but added that he ought not jump to any conclusions. They added that most teenage runaways come back home within twenty-four hours and recommended patience. Philip drew on his capacity for patience and discovered that he possessed a limited supply. By noon he was calling the police again, with the same result. He had of course walked up the block to confront Jimbo Monaghan, Mark's best friend, but Jimbo either knew nothing about the disappearance or pretended he knew nothing. Thinking he smelled complicity, Philip accused the boy of lying. Jimbo's mother, Margo, ordered him out of the house – threw him out, really. For a couple of hours, Philip drove around Millhaven, looking for his son everywhere he thought his son might be, every place he had heard Mark speak of. He knew it was a hopeless effort, but he was unable to keep himself from cruising past playgrounds his son had not visited in years, staring in the windows of fast-food restaurants, driving around and around Sherman Park. He felt so desperate he wept. In the space of ten days, he had lost both wife and son.

Grimly, Philip bounced back and forth between two equally fearful notions: that Mark had been abducted by the 'Sherman Park Killer,' who had already claimed two boys his age; and that Mark had killed himself, possibly in imitation of his mother, even more possibly out of the mixture of horror and despair set loose within him by what he had been obliged to witness. The police, being police, were concentrating on the first of these alternatives. They walked through the parks and searched the wooded areas in Millhaven but failed to uncover a body. They also checked the records at the airport, the train and bus stations; they, too, questioned Jimbo Monaghan, his parents, and other teenagers and parents Mark had known. When none of this yielded as much as a suggestion of the boy's whereabouts, the police released Mark's information and requested the assistance of the city's residents. A none-too-recent photograph was sent to the FBI and to police departments across the country. There, for all practical purposes, the matter rested.

Except of course for Philip, who at this pre-Dewey Dell stage could face none of the possibilities aroused by his son's disappearance: that a psychopath had kidnapped and probably murdered him; that he had killed himself in some location yet to be found; or that he had simply run off without

a word. When Philip found himself face to face with this unacceptable series of choices, another occurred to him, and he called his overprivileged, never quite to be trusted brother in New York.

'All right, you can tell me now,' he said. 'I never thought you'd be capable of doing a thing like this to your own brother, but I'm sure you had your reasons. He must have told you a hell of a story.'

'Philip, you'd better start at the beginning. What can I tell you now, and what do you think I did to you?'

'What *did* he tell you, exactly? How bad is it? Did I beat the crap out of him every night? Was I psychologically abusive?'

'Are you talking about Mark?'

'Gee, do you think? Why would I be asking you about Mark, I wonder? If my son happens to be there with you, Tim, I'm asking you to let me talk to him. No, I'm not asking. I'm begging.'

'Jesus, Philip, Mark left home? What happened?'

'What happened? My son hasn't been here for three days, that's what. So if he's staying in that fucked-up circus of yours on Grand Street, goddamn you, I'm on my knees here. Put him on. Do whatever you have to, all right?'

It took a while, but I did manage to convince Philip that his son was not hiding in my loft, and that I'd had nothing to do with his disappearance. I felt silenced, stunned, baffled.

'Why didn't you call me before this?'

'Because it didn't occur to me that he might be in New York until about an hour ago.'

Seen one way, Philip and I are alone in the world. We have no other siblings, no cousins or second cousins, no grandparents, no aunts or uncles, no living parents.

I asked him if there was anything I could do for him.

'Isn't one of your best friends Tom Pasmore? I want you to talk to him – get him to help me.'

Tom Pasmore, I add for posterity's sake, is an old Millhaven friend of mine who solves crimes for a living, not that he needs the money. He's like Sherlock Holmes or Nero Wolfe, except that he is a real person, not a fictional one. His (biological) father was the same way. He solved crimes in city after city, chiefly by going over all the records and documents in sight and making connections everyone else missed, connections you more or less have to be a genius to see. Tom inherited his methods along with his talents and his wardrobe. As far as I'm concerned, Tom Pasmore is the best private investigator in the world, but he only works on cases he chooses by himself. Back in '94 he helped me work out a terrible puzzle that my collaborator and I later turned into a novel.

I told Philip I would get to Millhaven as quickly as possible and added that I'd do my best to get Tom Pasmore to think about the boy's disappearance.

'Think about it? That's all?'

'In most cases, that's what Tom does. Think about things.'

'Okay, talk to the guy for me, will you?'

'As soon as I can,' I said. I didn't want to explain Tom Pasmore's schedule to my brother, who has the old-time schoolmaster's suspicion of anyone who does not arise at 7:00 and hit the hay before midnight. Tom Pasmore usually turns off his reading light around 4:00 A.M. and seldom gets up before 2:00 P.M. He likes single-malt whiskey, another matter best unmentioned to Philip, who had responded to Pop's alcohol intake by becoming a moralistic, narrow-minded teetotaler.

After I arranged for my tickets, I waited another hour and called Tom. He picked up as soon as he heard my voice on his answering machine. I described what had happened, and Tom asked me if I wanted him to check around, look at the records, see what he might be able to turn up. 'Looking at the records' was most of his method, for he seldom left the house and performed his miracles by sifting through newspapers, public records on-line and off, and all kinds of databases. Over the past decade he had become dangerously expert at using his computers to get into places where ordinary citizens were not allowed.

Tom said that you never knew what you could learn from a couple of hours' work, but that if the boy didn't turn up in the next day or two, he and I might be able to accomplish something together. In the meantime, he would 'scout around.' But – he wanted me to know – in all likelihood, as much as he hated to say it, my nephew had fallen victim to the monster who earlier probably had abducted and murdered two boys from the same part of town.

'I can't think about that, and neither can my brother,' I said. (I was wrong about the latter, I was to learn.)

Forty-five minutes later, Tom called me with some startling news. Had I known that my late sister-in-law had been related to Millhaven's first serial killer?

'Who was that?' I asked.

'A sweetheart named Joseph Kalendar.'

The name seemed familiar, but I could not remember why.

'Kalendar became public property in 1979 and 1980, when you were misbehaving in Samarkand, or wherever it was.'

He knew exactly where I had been in 1979 and 1980. 'Bangkok,' I said. 'And by 1980 I was hardly misbehaving at all. What did Kalendar do?'

Joseph Kalendar, a master carpenter, had begun by breaking into women's houses and raping them. After the third rape, he began bringing his fourteen-year-old son along with him. Soon after, he decided it would be prudent to murder the women after he and his son raped them. A couple of months later, he got even crazier. During his third-to-last foray, on the verbal orders of a persuasive deity, he had killed, then decapitated his son and left the boy's headless body sprawled beside their mutual victim's bed. God thanked him for his faithfulness and in a mighty voice sang that henceforth he, lowly Joseph Kalendar, family man, master carpenter, and Beloved Favorite of Jehovah, was charged with the erasure of the entire female gender worldwide, or at least as many as he could get around to exterminating before the police brought a close to the sacred project. In 1979 Kalendar was at last arrested. In 1980 he went on trial, was found not guilty by reason of insanity, and was sentenced to the Downstate Hospital for the Criminally Insane, where three years later he was strangled by a fellow inmate who objected wholeheartedly to Kalendar's attempt to wash him in the blood of the Lamb and deliver him posthaste into the arms of his Savior.

'This florid madman was related to Nancy Underhill?'

'They were first cousins,' Tom said.

'I guess that explains something my brother told me after the funeral,' I said.

'Can you think of one reason your nephew would have taken off?'

'Well,' I said, 'I can certainly think of one.'

3

NOT LONG AFTER he had read Nancy's obituary in the paper and seen Mark through his hotel room's window, Tim got into his rented Town Car and set out on an eccentric course to his brother's house. Even allowing for one or two episodes of backtracking, the drive from the Pforzheimer to Superior Street should have taken Tim no longer than twenty to twenty-five minutes. If he had chosen to get on the expressway, the trip would have been five minutes shorter, but because he had not been in his hometown for nearly five years, Tim decided to drive north from downtown, then turn west on Capital Drive and keep going until he hit Teutonia Avenue's six wide lanes, jog south-west on a diagonal and drive until he saw Sherman Park, Sherman Boulevard, Burleigh, or any of the little web of streets backed by alleys he had known in childhood. He knew where his brother lived. Assuming that its essential makeup had not changed significantly beyond a nice economic updrift, Philip had moved back into the neighborhood of his childhood. And as far as they went and no further, his assumptions had proved correct: adjusted for inflation, the average household income in the neighborhood made up of Superior, Michigan, Townsend, Auer, and Forty-fourth Street had probably quadrupled from the days of Tim's and Philip's childhood. However, other aspects, ones Philip had not taken into account, had changed along with income levels.

Tim had no trouble getting on Capital Drive and rolling west to Teutonia Avenue's wide swath through a landscape of shopping centers and three-story office buildings separated by taverns. Everything looked like a cleaner, brighter, more prosperous version of the Millhaven of old, exactly what his earlier visits had led him to expect. He saw the Burleigh sign from a block away and turned into a more residential area. Identical four-story apartment buildings of cream-colored brick marched along side by side, the narrow concrete strips to their entrances standing out against the grass like a row of neckties.

Half a mile on, he saw a sign for Sherman Drive and turned left. It was not Sherman Park or Sherman Boulevard, but it had to be in the same general area. Sherman Drive dead-ended in front of a windowless bunker of poured concrete called the Municipal Records Annex. Tim doubled back and turned left again onto a narrow one-way street called Sherman Annex Way, and this came to an end at the southwest corner of Sherman Park itself, where Pops had now and then escorted little Tim and little Philip to the magnificent wading pool, the jouncing teeter-totter, the high-flying swing set, and the little realm given to the sleeping tigers and ponderous elephants of its stupendous, now long-vanished zoo.

He drove completely around the park without quite figuring out where to go next. On his second spin around the perimeter, he noticed the sign for Sherman Boulevard, turned onto it, and was instantly rewarded by the appearance on the left side of the street in remembered or shadow form of a great, ambiguous landmark of his childhood, the Beldame Oriental Theater, presently the tabernacle of a sanctified Protestant sect.

But when he turned into the old network of alleys and intersections, Tim drove twice past his brother's house without being absolutely positive he had found it. The first time, he said to himself, *I don't think that's it*; the second time, *That isn't it, is it*? That, of course, was Philip's house, a combination of brick and fieldstone with a steeply pitched roof and an ugly little porch only slightly wider than the front door. Screwed into the screen door's wooden surround were the numerals 3324. With no further excuse for delaying, Tim parked his ostentatious but entirely comfortable vehicle a short way down the block and walked back through the humid sunlight. Where enormous elms had once arched their boughs over the street, the dry leaves of plane trees clung to their branches a modest distance above their pale, patchy trunks. Tim reached the walkway before his brother's house and checked his watch: the twenty-five-minute journey had taken him forty-five.

Tim pushed the buzzer. Far back in the house, a tiny bell rang. Footsteps plodded toward the door; a smudgy face ducked into, then out of, the narrow glass strips set high in the dark wood; the door swung back; and Philip stood before him, scowling through the gray scrim of the screen door. 'Decided to show up, after all,' he said.

'Nice to see you, too,' Tim said. 'How are you doing, Philip?'

With the air of one performing an act of charity, his brother stepped back to let him in. He looked a decade older that he had the last time Tim had seen him. His thinning hair was combed straight back from his forehead, revealing strips of scalp the same pinkish-gray as his deeply seamed face. Rimless spectacles with thin metal bows sat on his high-prowed nose. Above his soft, expansive belly, a silver tie tack anchored a shiny claret necktie to his cheap white shirt. He was still doing his utmost, Tim thought, to look exactly like what he was, a midlevel administrator of a thoroughly bureaucratic enterprise. A vice principalship was the kind of job Philip had spent all of his earlier life struggling to attain: unassailably respectable, tedious unto stupefaction, impervious to the whims of the economy, tied into a small but palpable degree of power, fodder for endless complaints.

'I'm still ambulatory,' Philip said. 'How the hell do you think I should be?' He moved the few steps that took him from the little foyer into the living room, and Tim followed. Nancy, it seemed, was not to be mentioned until Philip's sense of ritual had been satisfied.

'Sorry. Dumb question.'

'I guess it was nice of you to come all this way, anyhow. Sit down, rest up. After being in New York, you probably appreciate our famous midwestern peace and quiet.'

Having been given all the thanks he was likely to get, Tim walked across the living room and placed himself in an upholstered armchair that had come into Philip's household after Nancy's arrival. Philip stayed on his feet, watching him like a hotel detective. Philip's gray suit was too heavy for the weather, and he tugged a wrinkled handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his forehead. From overhead came the ongoing rhythmic pulse of an electric bass.

'There's a lot of action around the Pforzheimer,' Tim said. 'Some big-time director is shooting a movie on Jefferson Street.'

'Don't tell Mark. He'll just want to go.'

'He's already been there. I saw him from my window. He and a red-haired kid came out of Cathedral Square and walked down the street to watch them filming a scene. They were right beneath me.'

'That was Jimbo Monaghan, his best buddy. Hell, his one and only buddy. You see one, the other one's right behind him. Jimbo's not a bad kid, for a dodo. Went through junior high at Quincy without any more than a half dozen demerits. Most kids rack up twice that.'

'Did Mark?'

'I had to be a little extra hard on Mark. The kids would have made his life hell if I'd shown any favoritism. Do you remember what kids are like? Find a weakness, they home in like sharks. Little bastards are barely human.'

Philip thought giving his son demerits proved that he was a stern and responsible father, but the truth was that it had given him pleasure.

'I got Cokes, root beer, ginger ale. You want beer or anything stronger, you can supply it yourself.'

'Ginger ale, if you're having something.'

Philip ducked into the kitchen, and Tim took his usual cursory inspection of the living room. As ever, it contained the same peculiar mixture of furniture Philip had shifted from house to house before settling back in the old neighborhood. All of it seemed a bit more worn than it had been on Tim's previous visits: the long green corduroy sofa, black recliner, highboy, and octagonal glass coffee table from Mom and Pop sharing space with the blond wooden furniture from some now-bankrupt 'Scandinavian' furniture store. Tim could remember Mom sitting in the rocking chair beside Pop's

'davenport,' the fat needle working as she hooked thick, interwoven knots of the rug that covered three-fourths of Philip's living room floor. Fifty years ago, it had been a lot brighter: now, it was just a rag to keep your shoes from touching the floor.

Philip came back into the room holding two glasses beaded with condensation. He passed one to Tim and dropped onto the far end of the davenport. His gray suit bunched up around his hips and shoulders.

'Philip, with apologies for my earlier question, how are you doing these days? How are you handling it?'

Philip took a long pull at his ginger ale and sagged against the worn cushions. He seemed to be staring at something akin to a large insect moving up the half-wall leading to the dining room and kitchen.

'With apologies, huh? That's nice. It should be Nancy who apologizes to me, not you.' He fixed Tim with a cold, brown-eyed glare. The rimless spectacles slightly magnified his eyes. 'We're getting into a strange, strange topic here. It is *truly* strange, this topic. I have to say, it surpasseth comprehension. Do you know what I mean, or do I have to explain it to you?'

'I think I understand. I read the obituary in today's *Ledger*. When I saw the words "without warning," I thought –'

'You thought?'

'I thought Nancy probably killed herself.'

'Is that what you thought? Well, guess what? Big brother rings the bell.'

'Would you prefer it if I didn't understand?'

'*I* don't know what I'd prefer.' Philip's face twisted, and everything below his nose seemed to collapse like a punctured paper bag. 'Nobody asked me for my opinion about anything.' He snatched off his glasses and passed a hand over his eyes. 'No, they just go ahead and do whatever they feel like.' He emitted a shaky sigh.

'Do you think she should have asked your permission before she killed herself?'

Philip aimed an index finger at him. 'There, that's a great question, I mean it. A *great* fucking question.'

Tim swallowed cold ginger ale and forced himself to remain silent.

'Yes,' Philip said. 'I do think so. I would have said, *You selfish bitch, you can't kill yourself. You have a husband and a son. Are you crazy*?'

'It was selfish – a selfish act.'

'All suicides are selfish.' He considered that proposition. 'Unless the person is in tremendous pain, or dying, or whatever.'

'Was she feeling depressed lately?'

'What are you, a shrink? I don't know. Nancy usually seemed a little depressed, if you ask me.' He shot Tim a wary look. 'Are you asking if I *noticed* that she seemed depressed lately?'

'I'm not accusing you of anything, Philip.'

'Keep it that way. I'm not to blame for what happened. Nancy and I got along all right. Why she did it is a mystery to me. Maybe she had some kind of secret existence. Maybe I didn't know what was going on in her life. If she didn't tell me, how the hell could I?'

'How is Mark handling all this?'

Philip shook his head. 'The kid keeps his feelings all wrapped up inside. He's been hit hard, though. Keeps to himself, except for when he's with Jimbo, the knucklehead you saw today. We'll see how he gets through tonight and tomorrow and the next couple of weeks. If he looks like he needs it, I'll get him some counseling or therapy, or whatever.'

Tim said that sounded like a good idea.

'Sure it does, to you. You live in New York, where everybody sees a shrink. For you people, a shrink is a status symbol. Out here in the real world, it's different. Plenty of people see it as an admission that something is wrong with you.'

'You wouldn't have to tell anybody. Neither would Mark.'

'Word gets out,' Philip said. 'Vice principal's wife commits suicide, his son starts seeing a head-shrinker. How do you suppose that plays out? What kind of effect do you think it would have on my career? On top of that, those appointments don't come cheap. Excuse me, elder brother, but I'm a humble educator in the public school system, not a millionaire.'

'Philip, if Mark could benefit from therapy, and you'd have trouble paying for it, I'd be happy to take care of it.'

'Things aren't quite that dire,' Philip said. 'But thanks for the offer.'

'Do you really think your job is going to be affected by what Nancy did?'

'One way or another, yeah. Subtly, in most ways. But what do you think my odds are of moving into a principal's office anytime soon? I was on track before this. Now, who knows? It could hold me back for years. But you want to know the worst part of this whole deal?'

'Sure,' Tim said.

'Whenever anybody looks at me, they're going to say to themselves, *There's Underhill. His wife killed herself*. And two-thirds, three-fourths of them are going to think I had something to do with it. She did it because of me, they'll think. Goddamn it, I never thought I'd hate her, but I'm getting there. Fuck her. *Fuck* her.'

Tim decided to say nothing and let him roll on.

Philip glared at him. 'I have a role in this community. I have a certain *position*. Maybe you don't know what that means. Maybe you don't care. But it is of very, very great importance to me. And when I think that stupid woman did her best, out of no reason at all but her own private unhappiness, to tear down everything I've worked for all my life – yes, I'm angry, yes I am. She had no right to do this to me.'

At least one thing was clear to Tim Underhill as he watched his brother chewing an ice cube from the bottom of his empty glass: Philip was going to be of no use at all.

'What's our schedule?' he asked.

'For tonight?'

'For everything.'

'We go to the Trott Brothers Funeral Home from six to seven for the viewing, or the visitation, or whatever it's called. The funeral is at one tomorrow afternoon, out at Sunnyside.' Sunnyside, a large cemetery on the Far West Side of the city, was still segregated into separate areas for Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. There were no African-Americans in Sunnyside. When you drove past it on the expressway, it went on for mile after mile of flat green earth and headstones in long rows.

'Philip,' Tim said, 'I don't even know how Nancy died. If it isn't too painful for you, could you tell me about it?'

'Oh, boy. I guess you *wouldn't* know, would you? It's not exactly public information, thanks be to God. Well, well. Yes. I can tell you how she did it. You've earned it, haven't you? Coming out here all the way from New York City. All right, you want to know what someone does when she's going to kill herself and really wants to make sure there are no ifs, ands, or buts about it? If she wants to hit that nail right square on the head? What she does is, she basically kills herself three different ways, all at the same time.'

He tried to grin. The attempt was a hideous failure. 'I had this bottle of sleeping pills left over from a couple of years ago. Not long after I left for work that morning, Nancy swallowed most of the pills – twenty of them, more or less. Then she ran a nice hot tub. She put a plastic bag over her head and fastened it around her neck. After that, she got in the tub and picked up a knife and cut open

both of her forearms. Lengthwise, not those pussy sideways cuts people make when they're faking it. She was serious, I'll say that for her.'

The bass notes booming through the ceiling wavered in the air like butterflies.

Through the windows came the sound of cicadas, but Superior Street had never seen a cicada. Something else, Tim thought – what? Overhead, a door slammed. Two pairs of footsteps moved toward the top of the staircase.

'Enter the son and heir, accompanied by el sidekick-o faithful-o.'

Tim looked toward the staircase and saw descending the steps a pair of legs in baggy blue jeans, closely followed by its twin. A hand slid lightly down the railing; another hand shadowed it. Loose yellow sleeves, then loose navy sleeves. Then Mark Underhill's face moved into view, all eyebrows, cheekbones, and decisive mouth; just above it floated Jimbo Monaghan's round face, struggling for neutrality.

Mark kept his gaze downward until he reached the bottom of the staircase and had walked two steps forward. Then he raised his eyes to meet Tim's. In those eyes Tim saw a complex mixture of curiousity, anger, and secrecy. The boy was hiding something from his father, and he would continue to hide it; Tim wondered what would happen if he managed to get Mark into a private conversation.

No guile on Jimbo's part – he stared at Tim from the moment his face became visible.

'Looky here, it's Uncle Tim,' Philip said. 'Tim – you know Mark, and his best buddy-roo, Jimbo Monaghan.'

Reverting to an earlier stage of adolescence, the boys shuffled forward and muttered their greetings. Tim sent his brother a silent curse; now both boys felt insulted or mocked, and it would take Mark that much longer to open up.

He knows more than Philip about his mother's suicide, Tim thought. The boy glanced at him again, and Tim saw some locked-up knowledge surface in his eyes, then retreat.

'This guy look familiar to you, Tim?' Philip asked him.

'Yes, he does,' Tim said. 'Mark, I saw you from my window at the Pforzheimer early this afternoon. You and your friend here were walking toward the movie setup on Jefferson Street. Did you stay there long?'

A startled, wary glance from Mark; Jimbo opened and closed his mouth.

'Only a little while,' Mark said. 'They were doing the same thing over and over. Your room was on that side of the hotel?'

'I saw you, didn't I?'

Mark's face jerked into what may have been a smile but was gone too soon to tell. He edged sideways and pulled at Jimbo's sleeve.

'Aren't you going to stay?' his father asked.

Mark nodded, swallowing and rocking back on his heels while looking down at his scuffed sneakers. 'We'll be back soon.'

'But where are you going?' Philip asked. 'In about an hour, we have to be at the funeral home.'

'Yeah, yeah, don't worry.' Mark's eyes were sliding from his father to the front door and back again. 'We're just going out.'

He was in a nervous uproar, Tim saw. His engine was racing, and he was doing everything in his power to conceal it. Mark's body wanted to behave exactly as it had on Jefferson Street: it wanted to wave its arms and leap around. In front of his father these extravagant gestures had to be compressed into the most minimal versions of themselves. The energy of misery was potent as a drug. Tim had seen men uncaringly risk their lives under its influence, as if they had been doing speed. The boy was aching to get through the door; Jimbo would soon have to resist more high-pressure pleading. Tim hoped he could stand up to it; whatever Mark had in mind almost had to be reckless, half crazy.

'I hate this deliberate vagueness,' Philip said. 'What's *out*? Where is it?'

Mark sighed. ‘Out is just out, Dad. We got tired of sitting in my room, and now we want to walk around the block or something.’

‘Yo, that’s all,’ Jimbo said, focusing on a spot in the air above Philip’s head. ‘Walk around the block.’

‘Okay, walk around the block,’ Philip said. ‘But be back here by quarter to seven. Or before. I’m serious, Mark.’

‘I’m serious, too!’ Mark shouted. ‘I’m just going outside, I’m not running away!’

His face was a bright pink. Philip backed off, waving his hands before him.

Mark glanced at Tim for a moment, his handsome face clamped into an expression of frustration and contempt. Tim’s heart filled with sorrow for him.

Mark pivoted away, clumped to the door, and was gone, taking Jimbo with him. The screen door slammed shut.

‘Good God,’ Philip said, looking at the door. ‘He does blame me, the little ingrate.’

‘He has to blame someone,’ Tim said.

‘I know who it should be,’ Philip said. ‘Killed herself three times, didn’t she?’

Nodding meaninglessly, Tim went toward the big front window. Mark and Jimbo were moving north along the sidewalk much as they had proceeded down Jefferson Street. Mark was leaning toward his friend, speaking rapidly and waving his hands. His face was still a feverish pink.

‘You see them?’

‘Yep.’

‘What are they doing?’

‘Philip, I think they’re walking around the block.’

‘Didn’t Mark seem awfully tense to you?’

‘Kind of, yes.’

‘It’s the viewing and the funeral service,’ Philip said. ‘Once they’re history, he can start getting back to normal.’

Tim kept his mouth shut. He doubted that Philip’s concept of ‘normal’ would have any real meaning to his son.

On the grounds that the overall roominess more than made up for the added cost, whenever possible Tim Underhill rented Lincoln Town Cars. At a quarter to seven, the boys having returned from their walk in good time, he volunteered to drive everyone to Highland Avenue. They were standing on the sidewalk in the heat. Philip looked at the long black car with distaste.

‘You never got over the need to show off, did you?’

‘Philip, in this car I don’t feel like I’ve been squeezed into a tin can.’

‘Come on, Dad,’ put in Mark, who was looking at the car as if he wanted to caress it.

‘Not on your life,’ Philip said. ‘I’d feel like I was pretending to be something I’m not. Tim, you’re welcome to ride along with us in my Volvo if you don’t think you’d feel too confined.’

Philip’s twelve-year-old Volvo station wagon, the color of a rusty leaf, stood ten feet farther up the curb, as humble and patient as a mule.

‘After you, Alphonse,’ Tim said, and was pleased to hear Mark chuckle.

The Trott Brothers Funeral Home occupied the crest of a hill on Highland Avenue, and to those who looked up at it from the street after they left their vehicles – as did the four men young and old who left the leaf-colored Volvo – it looked as grand and dignified as a great English country house. Quarried stone, mullioned windows, a round turret – a place, you would say, where the loudest sounds would be the whispers of attendants, the rustle of memorial pamphlets, and some quiet weeping. Mark and Jimbo trailed behind as the little group walked toward the imposing building.

A languid man with a drastic combover waved them toward a muted hallway and a door marked TRANQUILLITY PARLOR. On a stand beside the door was a fat white placard.

Mrs Nancy K. Underhill

Viewing: 6:00–7:00 P.M.

Loving Wife and Mother

There, in the Tranquillity Parlor, lay the mortal remains of Nancy K. Underhill within a gleaming bronze coffin, the top half of its lid opened wide as a taxi door. The soft, buttoned interior of the coffin was a creamy off-white; Nancy K. Underhill's peaceful, empty face and folded hands had been painted and powdered to an only slightly unrealistic shade of pink. None of the four people who entered the small, dimly lighted chamber approached the coffin. Philip and Tim drifted separately to the back of the room and picked up the laminated cards prepared by the funeral home. On one side was a lurid depiction of a sunset over rippling water and a flawless beach; on the other, the Lord's Prayer printed beneath Nancy's name and dates. Philip took another of the cards from the stack and handed it to Mark, who had slipped into a seat next to Jimbo in the last row of chairs.

Mark snatched the card from his father's hand without a word.

When Jimbo looked around for a card of his own, Tim passed one to him. Both boys were deep in contemplation of the Pacific sunset when a brisk, rotund little woman bustled into the room. Joyce Brophy was the daughter of the last, now-deceased, of the Trott Brothers.

'Well, here we are, Mr Underhill, isn't that right? It's a pleasure to see you, sir, and to welcome you back to our humble establishment, despite the sadness of the circumstances. I think we can all say that what we're doing is the best we can, wouldn't you agree, Mr Underhill?'

'Um,' Philip said.

She turned a brisk, meaningless smile upon Tim. 'And a heartfelt welcome to you, sir. Are you a member of the family circle?'

'He's my brother,' Philip said. 'From New York.'

'New York, New York? Well, that's wonderful.' Tim feared that she would take his hand, but she merely patted his arm. 'The hubby and I had a lovely weekend in New York City, oh, it was nine – ten years ago now. We saw *Les Mis*, and the next day we saw *Cats*. You New Yorkers never run out of things to do and places to go, do you? Must be like living in an anthill, ants ants ants, all running running running.'

Having disposed of Tim, she transferred her hand to Philip's arm. 'Feeling a little bit shy, are we? You'd be surprised how many of our people feel that exact same way, but the minute you go up and commune with your late missus, you'll understand there's no need at all for that sort of thing.'

She placed her free hand on his elbow and piloted him down the aisle between the rows of empty chairs. Loyally, Tim came along behind.

'Now, see, Mr Underhill? Your little bride looks every bit as peaceful and beautiful as you could ever want to remember her.'

Philip stared down at the effigy in the coffin. So did Tim. Nancy appeared to have been dead since birth.

In a strangled voice, Philip said, 'Thank you for all you've done.'

'And if you will take the advice of someone who is pretty much an expert in this sort of thing,' Joyce Brophy whispered close to Philip's ear, 'you make sure that handsome boy of yours comes up here and communes with his mama, because believe you me, if he misses this chance he'll never have another and he'll regret it all the rest of his life.'

'Excellent advice,' said Philip.

With a neighborly pat of his wrist, she bustled out of the room.

'Mark, this is your last chance to see your mother,' Philip said, speaking in the general direction of his left shoulder.

Mark mumbled something that sounded unpleasant.

'It's the reason we're here, son.' He turned all the way around and kept his voice low and reasonable. 'Jimbo, you can come up or not, as you wish, but Mark has to say good-bye to his mother.'

Both boys stood up, looking anywhere but at the coffin, then moved awkwardly into the center aisle. Tim drifted away to the side of the room. Halfway to the coffin, Mark looked directly at his mother, instantly glanced away, swallowed, and looked back. Jimbo whispered something to him and settled himself into an aisle chair. When Mark stood before the coffin, frozen-faced, Philip nodded at him with what seemed a schoolmaster's approval of a cooperative student. For a moment only, father and son remained together at the head of the room; then Philip lightly settled a hand on Mark's shoulder, removed it, and without another glance turned away and joined Tim at the side of the room. In wordless agreement, the two men returned to their earlier station next to the dark, polished table and the stacks of memorial cards. A few other people had entered the room.

Slowly, Jimbo rose to his feet and walked up the aisle to stand beside his friend.

'You have to feel sorry for the poor kid,' Philip said softly. 'Terrible shock.'

'You had a terrible shock yourself,' Tim said. At Philip's questioning glance, he added, 'When you found the body. Found Nancy like that.'

'The first time I saw Nancy's body, she was all wrapped up, and they were taking her out of the house.'

'Well, who …' A dreadful recognition stopped his throat.

'Mark found her that afternoon – came home from God knows where, went into the bathroom, and there she was. He called me, and I told him to dial 911 and then go outside. By the time I got home, they were taking her to the ambulance.'

'Oh, no,' Tim breathed out. He looked down the aisle at the boy, locked into unreadable emotions before his mother's casket.

Inside his brother's house on the following afternoon, after the sad little funeral, a good number of the neighbors, many more than Tim had anticipated, were sitting on the furniture or standing around with soft drinks in their hands. (Most of them held soft drinks, anyhow. Since his arrival at the gathering, Jimbo's father, Jackie Monaghan, whose ruddy, good-humored face was the template for his son's, had acquired a dull shine in his eyes and a band of red across his cheekbones. These were probably less the product of grief than of the contents of the flask outlined in his hip pocket. Tim had witnessed two of the other attendees quietly stepping out of the room with good old Jackie.)

Jimbo's mother, Margo Monaghan, had startled Tim by revealing that she had read one of his books. Even more startling was her extraordinary natural beauty. Without a trace of makeup Margo Monaghan looked like two or three famous actresses but did not really resemble any of them. She looked the way the actresses would look if you rang their bell and caught them unprepared at three o'clock on an ordinary afternoon. Amazingly, the other men in the room paid no attention to her. If anything, they acted as though she were obscurely disfigured and they felt sorry for her.

Part of the reason Tim had expected no more than three or four people to gather at his brother's house was Philip's personality; the remainder concerned the tiny number of mourners at the grave site in Sunnyside Cemetery. The pitiless sunlight had fallen on the husband, son, and brother-in-law of the deceased; on the Rent-a-minister; on Jimbo, Jackie, and Margo; on Florence, Shirley, and Mack, Nancy's gas company friends; on Laura and Ted Shillington, the Underhills' next-door neighbors to the right, and Linda and Hank Taft, the next-door neighbors to the left. The Rent-a-minister had awaited the arrival of additional mourners until the delay became almost embarrassing. A grim nod from Philip had finally set him in motion, and his harmless observations on motherhood, unexpected death, and the hope of salvation lasted approximately eight endless minutes and were followed by a brief prayer and the mechanical descent of the casket into the grave. Philip, Mark, and Tim picked up clayey brown clods from beside the open grave and dropped them onto the lid of the coffin; after a second, Jimbo Monaghan did the same, giving inspiration to the other mourners, who followed suit.

Back on Superior Street, Laura Shillington and Linda Taft stopped off to pick up the tuna casseroles, Jell-O and marshmallow salad, ambrosia, and coffee cake they had prepared. Florence, Shirley, and Mack partook of the banquet and the Kool-Aid and left soon after. Their departure

had an insignificant effect on the assemblage, which by that time had grown to something like thirty. Tim wondered if so many people had ever before been in Philip's house at the same time. Whatever his experience as a host, Philip now moved easily through the various groups, talking softly to his neighbors and the other guests. The Rochenkos, a pair of young elementary school teachers incongruous in matching polo shirts and khaki trousers, showed up, and so did a sour-looking old man in a plaid shirt who introduced himself to Tim as 'Omar Hillyard, the neighborhood pest' and seldom moved out of the corner from which he eyed the action.

Four people from John Quincy Adams arrived. After his colleagues turned up, Philip spent most of his time with them. Their little group settled at the far end of the dining room, within easy striking distance of the table.

Tim was introduced to Linda and Hank, Laura and Ted, the Monaghans, and a few other neighbors whose names he did not remember. When Philip attempted to reintroduce him to Omar Hillyard, the old man held up his hands and retreated deeper into his corner. 'Neighborhood pest,' Philip whispered. In the dining room, Tim shook the hands of Philip's coworkers, Fred and Tupper and Chuck (the guidance counselor, the school secretary, and the administrative secretary) and Mr Battley, the principal, a man set apart from the others by the dignity of his office. Philip seemed perfectly comfortable with this group, despite his evident concern for Mr Battley's ongoing comfort. Like Philip, his superior wore a slightly oversized suit, a white shirt, and a tie with a tie tack. Mr Battley's rimless eyeglasses were identical to Philip's. And like Philip, Fred, Tupper, and Chuck, Mr Battley quietly suggested that they owned a higher, nobler calling than the salesmen, factory foremen, clerks, and mechanics around them.

Almost always flanked by Jimbo Monaghan, Mark filtered through the little crowd, now and then stopping to say something or be spoken to. Men settled their hands on his shoulder, women pecked him on the cheek. Not for a moment did he seem at ease or even at home. What you saw when you looked at Mark was a young man who longed desperately to be elsewhere. He concealed it as well as he could, which is to say not very successfully. Tim was not sure how much of what was said to him Mark actually took in. His face had never quite lost the frozen, locked-up expression that had overtaken it in the Tranquillity Parlor. He nodded, now and again offered his handsome smile, but behind these gestures he remained untouched and apart; remained also, Tim thought, under the sway of the amped-up energy, that inflammatory recklessness, which had made him leap up and spin around when he was alone on the sidewalk with his red-haired friend.

This was the quality that most made Tim hope that Philip would find it in himself to aid his son. He was afraid of what Mark might do if left to himself. The boy could not bear what he had seen, and without sensitive adult help, he would break under its fearful weight.

Spotting Mark for once standing by himself near the living room window, Tim pushed his way through the crowd and sidled next to him. 'I think you should come to New York and stay with me for a week or so. Maybe in August?'

Mark's pleasure at this suggestion gave him hope.

'Sure, I'd love that. Did you say anything to Dad?'

'I will later,' Tim said, and went back across the room.

While being introduced to Philip's principal, Tim glanced again at Mark, and saw him shrug away from a wet-eyed elderly couple and cut through the crowd toward Jimbo. Whispering vehemently, Mark nudged Jimbo toward the dining room.

'I understand you're a writer of some sort,' said Mr Battley.

'That's right.'

Polite smile. 'Who do you write for?'

'Me, I guess.'

'Ah.' Mr Battley wrestled with this concept.

'I write novels. Short stories, too, but novels, mostly.'

Mr Battley found that he had another question after all. ‘Has any of your stuff been published?’

‘All of it’s been published. Eight novels and two short-story collections.’

Now at least a fraction of the principal’s attention had been snagged.

‘Would I know any of your work?’

‘Of course not,’ Tim said. ‘You wouldn’t like it at all.’

Mr Battley’s mouth slid into an uneasy smile, and his eyes cut away toward his underlings. In a second he was gone. On the other side of the space he had occupied, Philip Underhill and Jackie Monaghan stood deep in conversation, their backs to their sons. The boys were a couple of feet closer to them than Tim, but even Tim could hear every word their fathers said.

‘Wasn’t Nancy related to this weird guy who used to live around here? Somebody said something about it once, I don’t remember who.’

‘Should have kept his mouth shut, whoever he was,’ Philip said.

‘A murderer? That’s what I heard. Only, there was a time when people called him a hero, because he risked his life to save some kids.’

Mark swiveled his head toward them.

‘I heard they were black, those kids. Must have been one of the first black families around here. It was back when they weren’t accepted the way they are now.’

Tim waited for his brother to say something revolting about acceptance. At the time he’d sold his house in the suburbs and bought, at what seemed a bargain price, the place on Superior Street, Philip had been unaware that the former Pigtown was now something like 25 percent black. This had simply escaped his notice. It was Philip’s assumption that the neighborhood would have remained as it had been in his boyhood – respectable, inexpensive, and as white as a Boy Scout meeting in Aberdeen. When the realization came, it outraged him. Adding to his wrath was the presence of a great many interracial couples, generally black men with white wives. When Philip saw such a couple on the sidewalk, the force of his emotions often drove him across the street. No black people of either gender had bothered to drop in for the ‘reception,’ as Tim had overheard Philip describing the gathering.

‘I’d say we’re still working on that acceptance business,’ Philip said. ‘To be accepted, you have to prove you’re worthy of acceptance. Are we in agreement?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘When I have my vice principal’s hat on, I am scrupulously fair. I have to be. I never make any decision based on race. Here in the privacy of my own home, I believe I am entitled to my own opinion, however unpopular it may be.’

‘Absolutely,’ Jackie repeated. ‘I’m with you one hundred percent. Don’t say any of this stuff to my wife.’

Their sons looked at each other and began to back away.

‘But whatever you hear about my wife’s family – my *late* wife’s family – take it with a grain of salt. Those people were as crazy as bedbugs. I should have known better than to marry into a bunch of screwballs like that.’

His face white, Mark silently glided around the two men and vanished into the kitchen. Jimbo followed, looking stricken. The men never noticed.

When Tim flew back to New York the next day, it was with the sour, unpleasant feeling that Philip might after all have driven Nancy to suicide.

Half an hour before they landed at La Guardia, a delicious aroma filled the cabin, and the flight attendants came down the aisle handing out the chocolate-chip cookies. Tim wondered what Mark was doing and how he felt. Philip was incapable of doing what was right – the boy might as well have been all alone. Tim’s growing anxiety made him feel like hijacking the plane and making it return to Millhaven. He promised himself to send the boy an e-mail the minute he got home; then he promised himself to get Mark to New York as soon as possible.

Part Two THE HOUSE ON MICHIGAN STREET

4

A WEEK BEFORE Tim Underhill's initial flight to Millhaven, his nephew, Mark, began to realize that something was wrong with his mother. It was nothing that he could quite pin down, nothing obvious. Unless her constant air of worried distraction had a physical origin, she did not appear to be ill. Mark's mother had never been an upbeat person, exactly, but he did not think that she had ever before been so out of it for so long. As she went through the motions of preparing dinner and washing dishes, she seemed only half present. The half of her taking care of things was pretending to be whole, but the other half of Nancy Underhill was in some weird, anxious daze. Mark thought his mother looked as though all of a sudden she had been given some huge new problem, and whenever she allowed herself to think about it, the problem scared the hell out of her.

On a recent night, he had come home shortly before eleven P.M. after being out with Jimbo Monaghan – 'being out' a euphemism for the one activity that had compelled him during these past days – hoping not to be punished for having missed his curfew by twenty minutes or so. Ten-thirty was a ridiculously early hour for a fifteen-year-old to have to be home, anyhow. In he had come, twenty minutes past his curfew, expecting to be interrogated longer than he had been AWOL and ordered into bed. However, Mark did not take off his shoes or tiptoe to the stairs. Some unacknowledged part of him regretted that the living room was dark except for the dim light leaking in from the kitchen, and that neither of his parents was ensconced on the davenport, tapping the crystal of a wristwatch.

From the foyer he could see a light burning at the top of the stairs. That would be for both his benefit and his parents' peace of mind: if they woke up to see that the hallway was dark, they would know he had come home, and they could perfect the scolding he would get in the morning. The dim yellow haze in the living room probably meant that either his father or his mother had grown sick of lying in bed and gone downstairs to wait for their errant son.

He moved into the living room and looked through to the kitchen. Curiouser and curiouser. The kitchen did not appear to be the source of the light. The floor tiles and the sink were touched by a faint illumination leaking in from the side, which meant that the overhead light in the downstairs bathroom was on.

Riddle: since the upstairs bathroom is right across the hall from their bedroom, why would one of his parents come downstairs for a nocturnal pee?

Answer: because she was downstairs already, dummy, waiting to give you hell.

That light spilled into the kitchen meant that the bathroom door was either completely or partially open, thereby presenting Mark with a problem. He made a little more noise than was necessary on his journey across the dining room. He coughed. When he heard nothing from the region in question, he said, 'Mom? Are you up?'

There was no answer.

'I'm sorry I'm late. We forgot what time it was.' Emboldened, he took another step forward. 'I don't know why my curfew's so early anyhow. Almost everybody in my class …'

The silence continued. He hoped his mother had not fallen asleep in the bathroom. A less embarrassing possibility was that she had gone upstairs without switching off the light.

Mark braced himself for whatever he might see, went into the kitchen, and looked at the bathroom. The door hung half open. Through the gap between the door and the frame, he could see a vertical section of his mother. She was seated on the edge of the bathtub in a white nightgown, and on her face was an expression of dazed incomprehension, shot through with what he thought was fear. It was the expression of one who awakens from a nightmare and does not yet fully realize that nothing she had seen was real.

'Mom,' he said.

She failed to register his presence. A chill slithered from the bottom of his spine all the way up his back.

'Mom,' he said, 'wake up. What are you doing?'

His mother continued to stare with empty eyes at something that was nowhere in front of her. Folded tightly together, her hands rested on the tops of her clamped knees. Her shoulders slumped, and her hair looked dull and rumpled. Mark wondered if she could actually see anything at all; he wondered if she had drifted downstairs in her sleep. He came within a foot of the bathroom door and gently pulled it all the way open.

'Do you need help, Mom?'

To his relief, increments of consciousness slowly returned to his mother's face. Her hands released each other, and she wiped her palms on the fabric spread across her knees. She blinked, then blinked again, as if deliberately. A tentative hand rose to her cheek, and awareness dimly appeared in her eyes. Very slowly, she lifted her head and met his gaze.

'Mark.'

'Are you okay, Mom?'

She swallowed and again lightly stroked her cheek.

'I'm fine,' she told him.

5

NOT FINE, SHE was emerging from the aftereffects of a profound shock. Just now, a girl of five or six in ripped, dirty coveralls had materialized in front of her, simply come into being, like an eerily solid hologram. The child was inconsolable, her weeping would never stop, so great, so crushing, were the injuries this child had endured. Frightened and dismayed, Nancy had thought to reach out and stroke her hair. But before she was able to raise her hand, the sobbing child turned her head and gave Nancy a glance of concentrated ill will that struck her like a blow. Pure vindictive animosity streamed from her, directed entirely at Nancy. This *happened*. Having happened, it spoke of a ferocious guilt, as ferocious as the child herself.

Yes I am here, yes I was real. You denied me.

Nancy found she was trembling violently and was incapable of speech. She had nothing to say anyhow. Back in the shabby little suburban house in Carrollton Gardens, she could have spoken, but then she had remained silent. Terror rooted her to the side of the tub. Why had she come in here in the first place?

Having communicated, the little girl vanished, leaving Nancy in shock. She had never seen that child before, but she knew who she was, yes she did. And she knew her name. Finally, Lily had come searching for her, after all.

6

‘ARE YOU SURE?’ Mark asked.

‘I’m just … you surprised me.’

‘Why are you sitting here?’

Nancy raised her left arm and looked at her bare wrist. ‘You’re late.’

‘Mom, you’re not wearing your watch.’

She lowered her arm. ‘What time is it?’

‘About eleven. I was with Jimbo. I guess we forgot about the time.’

‘What do you and Jimbo do at night hour after hour?’

‘Hang out,’ he said. ‘You know.’ He changed the subject. ‘What are you doing down here?’

‘Well,’ she said, collecting herself a bit more successfully. ‘I was worried because you hadn’t come home. So I went downstairs … I guess I dozed off.’

‘You looked funny,’ he said.

Nancy wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands, her mouth flickering between mirth and despair. ‘Get yourself to bed, young man. I won’t say anything to your father, but this is the last time, understand?’

Mark understood. He was not to say anything to his father, either.

7

MARK'S OBSESSION HAD begun quietly and unobtrusively, as simple curiosity, with no hint of the urgency it would so quickly acquire. He and Jimbo had been out with their skateboards, trying simultaneously to improve their skills, look at least faintly impressive, and irritate a few neighbors. Over and over they had seen it proved that the average adult cannot abide the sight of a teenage boy on a skateboard. Something about the combination of baggy jeans, bent knees, a backward baseball cap, and a fiberglass board rattling along on two sets of wheels made the average adult male hyperventilate. The longer the run, the angrier they got. If you fell down, they yelled, 'Hurt yourself, kid?'

Unsurprisingly, the city of Millhaven offered no skateboarding venues with half-pipes, bowls, and purpose-built ramps. What it had instead were parking lots, the steps of municipal buildings, construction sites, and a few hills. The best parking lots tended to be dominated by older kids who had no patience with newbies like Mark and Jimbo and tended either to mock their equipment or to try to steal it from them. They did have amazingly good equipment. Mark had seen a *Ledger* classified ad placed by a dreadlocked twenty-year-old hippie named Jeffie Matusczak who was giving up the sport to pursue his spiritual life in India and was willing to sell his two boards for fifty dollars apiece. They went on the Internet and spent the last of their money on DC Manteca shoes. Their outfits looked great, but their skills were drastically under par. Because they wished to avoid ridicule and humiliation, they did some of their skateboarding in the playground at Quincy; some on the front steps of the county museum, far downtown; but most of it on the streets around their houses, especially Michigan Street, one block west.

On the day Mark's obsession began, he had pushed himself past the entrance to the alley, rolled up to Michigan Street, and given the board a good kick so that he could do the corner in style, slightly bent over, his arms extended. Michigan Street had a much steeper pitch than Superior Street, and its blunt curves had donated a number of daredevil bruises to the forearms and calves of both boys. With Jimbo twenty or thirty feet behind him, Mark swung around the corner in exemplary style. Then it took place, the transforming event. Mark saw something he had never really, never quite *taken in* before, although it had undoubtedly been at its present location through all the years he had been living around the corner. It was a little house, nondescript in every way, except for the lifeless, almost hollowed-out look of a building that had long stood empty.

Knowing that he must have looked at that house a thousand times or more, Mark wondered why he had never truly noticed it. His eyes had passed over its surface without pausing to register it. Until now, the building had receded into the unremarkable background. He found this so extraordinary that he stepped backward off his board, pushed sharply down on its tail, and booted it up off the street. For once, this stunt worked exactly as it was supposed to, and the nose of the skateboard's deck flew up into his waiting hand. Jimbo rumbled up beside him and braked to a halt by planting one foot on the ground.

'Stellar,' Jimbo said. 'So why did you stop, yo?'

Mark said nothing.

'What're you looking at?'

'That house up there.' Mark pointed.

'What about it?'

'You ever seen that place before? I mean, really *seen* it?'

'It hasn't gone anywhere, dude,' Jimbo said. He took a few steps forward, and Mark followed. 'Yeah, I've seen it. So have you. We run past that stupid place every time we come down this street.'

'I swear to you, I have never, ever seen that house before. In my whole life.'

'Bullshit.' Jimbo stalked about fifteen feet ahead, then turned around and feigned boredom and weariness.

Irritated, Mark flared out at him. ‘Why would I bullshit you about something like this? Fuck you, Jimbo.’

‘Fuck you, too, Marky-Mark.’

‘Don’t call me that.’

‘Then stop bullshitting me. It’s stupid, anyhow. I suppose you never saw that cement wall behind it either, huh?’

‘Cement wall?’ Mark trudged up beside his friend.

‘The one behind your house. On the other side of the alley from your sorry-ass back fence.’

The wooden fence Philip Underhill had years ago nailed into place around a latched gate at the far end of their little backyard sagged so far over that it nearly touched the ground.

‘Oh, yeah,’ Mark said. ‘The wall thing, with the barbed wire on top. What about it?’

‘It’s in back of this place, dummy. That’s the house right behind yours.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ Mark said. ‘Right you are.’ He squinted uphill. ‘Does that place have numbers on it?’

Rust-brown holes pocked the discolored strip of the frame where the numerals had been.

‘Somebody pried ’em off. Doesn’t matter. Check out the numbers on the other side. What are they?’

Mark glanced at the house closest to him. ‘Thirty-three twenty-one.’ He looked at Jimbo, then carried his skateboard up the low hill until he was standing in front of the abandoned building and read off the numbered address of the next house in line. ‘Thirty-three twenty-five.’

‘So what’s the address of this one?’

‘Thirty-three twenty-three,’ Mark said. ‘Really, I never saw this place before.’ He began to giggle at the sheer absurdity of what he had said.

Jimbo grinned and shook his head. ‘Now we got that out of the way –’

‘They had a fire,’ Mark said. ‘Check out the porch.’

‘Huh,’ Jimbo said. The wooden floor of the porch and the four feet of brick below the right front window had been scorched black. These signs of an old fire resembled a fading bruise, not a wound. The place had assimilated the dead fire into its being.

‘Looks like someone tried to burn it down,’ Jimbo said.

Mark could see the flames traveling along the porch, running up the bricks, then subsiding, growing fainter, dying. ‘Place wouldn’t burn,’ he said. ‘You can see that, can’t you? The fire just went out.’ He stepped forward, but not far enough to place a foot on the first rectangular stone of the walkway. There was a bemused, abstracted expression on his face. ‘It’s empty, right? Nobody lives there.’

‘Duh,’ said Jimbo.

‘You don’t think that’s a little unusual?’

‘I think you’re a little unusual.’

‘Come on, think about it. Do you see any other empty houses around Sherman Park? Have you ever heard of one?’

‘No, but I’ve seen this one. Unlike you.’

‘But why is it empty? These houses must be a pretty good deal, if you’re not completely racist, like my dad.’

‘Don’t leave Jackie out,’ Jimbo said. ‘He’d be insulted.’

A well-known foe of skateboards, Skip, old Omar Hillyard’s even more ancient, big-nosed dog, pushed itself to its feet and uttered a sonorous bark completely empty of threat.

‘I mean,’ Jimbo went on, ‘it’s not one of those places with whaddyacallems, parapets, like the Munster house. It’s just like all the other houses in this neighborhood. Especially yours.’

It was true, Mark saw. Except for the narrowness of the porch and the beetle-browed look of the roofline, the building greatly resembled the Underhill house.

‘How long do you think it’s been empty?’

'A long time,' Jimbo said.

Tiles had blown off the roof, and paint was flaking off the window frames. Despite the sunlight, the windows looked dark, even opaque. A hesitation, some delicacy of feeling, kept Mark from going up the walkway, jumping the steps onto the porch, and peering through those blank windows. Whatever lay beyond the unwelcoming windows had earned its peace. He did not want to set his feet upon those stones or to stand on that porch. How strange; it worked both ways. All at once, Mark felt that the house's very emptiness and abandonment made up a force field that extended to the edge of the sidewalk. The air itself would reject his presence and push him back.

And yet …

'I don't get it. How could I miss seeing this place before today?' He thought the house looked like a clenched fist.

Jimbo and Mark spent the next two hours rolling down Michigan Street, sweeping into curved arcs, leaping from the street onto the sidewalk, jumping off the curb back into the street. They made nearly as much noise as a pair of motorcyclists, but no one stepped outside to complain. Whenever Mark eyed the empty house, he half-expected it to have dissolved again back into its old opacity, but it kept presenting itself with the same surprising clarity it had shown when he'd first rolled around the corner. The house at 3323 North Michigan had declared itself, and now it was here to stay. His obsession, which in the manner of obsessions would change everything in his life, had taken hold.

During dinner that evening, Mark noticed that his mother seemed a bit more distracted than usual. She had prepared meat loaf, which both he and his father considered a gourmet treat. After asking the customary perfunctory questions about how his day had gone and receiving his customary perfunctory evasions, Philip was free to concentrate on impersonal matters. Instead of recounting tales of intrigue and heroism from the front line of the gas company's customer relations office, his mother seemed to be attending to an offstage conversation only she could hear. Mark's thoughts returned again and again to the house on Michigan Street.

Now he wished that he had after all walked up to the place, climbed onto the porch, and looked in the window. What he remembered of the feelings he had experienced in front of the house boiled down to a weird kind of politeness, as if his approach would have been a violation. A violation of what? Its privacy? Abandoned buildings had no sense of privacy. Yet … he remembered feeling that the building had *wanted to keep him away* and erected a shield to hold him back. So *the building* had kept him from going up the stone walkway? That was ridiculous. *Mark* had kept Mark from leaving the sidewalk. He knew why, too, though he did not want to admit it. The house had spooked him.

'Pretty quiet tonight, Mark,' said his father.

'Don't pick on him. Mark's fine,' his mother said in a lifeless voice.

'Am I picking on him? Am I picking on you?'

'I don't know. Are you?' He watched his mother shaving tiny slices off her meat loaf and sliding them to the side of her plate.

His father was getting ready to call him on his insubordination. Mark rushed through the verbal formula for exiting the dining room and said, 'Jimbo's waiting for me.'

'God forbid you should keep Jimbo waiting. What are you going to do that's so important?'

'Nothing.'

'When it begins to get dark, I don't want to hear the sounds of those skateboards. Hear me?'

'Sure, fine,' he said, and carried his plate into the kitchen before his father remembered that his irritation had a cause more specific than its usual source, his son's adolescence.

After losing the yolky look of the afternoon, the sunlight had muted itself to a dispersed, fleeting shade of yellow that struck Mark Underhill with the force of a strong fragrance or a rich chord from a guitar. Departure, beautiful in itself, spoke from the newly shorn grass and infolding hollyhocks in the Shillingtons' backyard. He thought he heard the scraping of an insect; then the sound ceased. He rushed toward his destination.

Beyond the defeated fence Jimbo had remarked lay eight feet of dusty alley, and beyond the alley rose the cement-block wall also remarked by Jimbo. If the wall fell over and remained intact, it would blanket fourteen feet of the alley with concrete blocks; and the triple strands of barbed wire running along the top of the wall would nearly touch Philip Underhill's ruined fence.

Eight feet tall, fourteen feet long, and mounted with coils of barbed wire – Mark had certainly noticed the wall before, but until this moment it had seemed no less ordinary than the Tafts' empty doghouse and the telephone wires strung overhead, ugly and unremarkable. Now he saw that while it was undoubtedly ugly, the wall was anything but unremarkable. Someone had actually gone to the trouble to build this monstrosity. The only function it could possibly have had was to conceal the rear of the house and to discourage burglars or other invaders from sneaking onto the property from the alley.

Both ends of the wall disappeared into a thick mass of weeds and vines that had engulfed wooden fences six feet high walling in the backyard on both sides like false, drastically overgrown hedges. From the alley, this vegetation looked impenetrably dense. In mid-summer, it oozed out a heavy vegetal odor mingling fertility and rot. Mark could catch a hint of that odor now, fermenting itself up at the heart of the weedy thicket. He had never been able to decide if it was one of the best smells he knew, or one of the worst.

That he could not see the house from the alley made him want to look at it again all the more. It was a desire as strong as thirst or hunger – a desire that dug a needle into him.

He ran up the narrow alley until he reached the Monaghans' backyard, vaulted over their three feet of brick wall, and trotted over the parched, clay-colored earth softened by islands of grass to their back door, which he opened a crack.

'Yo, Jimbo!' he called through the opening. 'Can you come out?'

'He's on his way, Marky,' came the voice of Jimbo's mother. 'Why are you back there?'

'I felt like coming up the alley.'

She appeared in the arch to the kitchen, coming toward him with an unsettling smile. Margo Monaghan's smile was not her only unsettling feature. She was easily the most beautiful woman Mark had ever seen, in movies or out of them. Her watercolor red hair fell softly to just above her neck, and she combed it with her fingers. In summer, she usually wore T-shirts and shorts or blue jeans, and the body in these yielding, informal clothes sometimes made him feel like swooning. The woman smiling at Mark now as she walked to the screen door seemed not only to have no idea of how stunning she was, but to have no personal vanity at all. She was friendly in a half-maternal way, slopping around in her old clothes. Apart from her amazing looks, she fit into the neighborhood perfectly. His mother was the only person Mark had ever heard speak of Mrs Monaghan's beauty. She opened the door and leaned against the frame. Instantly, Mark's penis began to thicken and grow. He shoved his hands into his pockets, grateful for the roominess of his jeans. She made the situation infinitely worse by reaching out and stroking the top of his head with the palm of her hand.

'I wish Jimbo would get one of those haircuts,' she said. 'He looks like a silly hippie. Yours is so much cooler.'

Mark needed a moment to realize that she was talking about body temperature.

'What adventures are the homeboys getting into tonight?'

'Nothing much.'

'I keep asking Jimbo to show me what he can do on that skateboard, but he never does!'

'We have a way to go before we're ready for the public,' Mark said.

She had the whitest, purest skin he had ever seen, more translucent than a young girl's; it seemed that he could look down through layers, getting closer and closer to her inner light. The blue of her irises leaked out in a perfect circle into the whites, another suggestion of gauzy filminess contradicted by the luxuriance of the shape beneath the black T-shirt, which bore the slogan: 69 LOVE SONGS.

It was one of his, borrowed weeks ago by Jimbo. His shirt, hugging Margo Monaghan's shoulders, Margo Monaghan's chest. Oh God oh God.

'You're a handsome kid,' she said. 'Wait till those high school vixens get their mitts on you.'

His face had become as hot as a glowing electrical coil.

'Oh, honey, I'm sorry I embarrassed you,' she said, rendering his embarrassment complete. 'I'm such a klutz, honest –'

'*Mo-om*,' Jimbo bellowed, sidling past and nearly pushing her aside. 'I told you, stop picking on my friends!'

'I wasn't picking on Mark, sweetie, I –'

If you wanted to drive yourself crazy you could remind yourself that fifteen years ago, Jimbo had crawled out from between Margo Monaghan's columnar legs.

Jimbo said, 'All right, Mom,' and jumped down the steps to the backyard. Mark pressed a hand to a burning cheek and glanced at his friend's mother.

'Go,' she said.

He jumped off the steps and caught up to Jimbo on the other side of the low brick wall.

'I hate it when she does that,' Jimbo said.

'Does what?'

'Talks to my friends. It's creepy. It's like she's trying to get *information*.'

'I don't mind, honest.'

'Well, I do. So what do you want to do?'

'Check out that house some more.'

'Yeah, let's go to the dump and shoot rats.'

This was an allusion to a Woody Allen movie they had seen a couple of years before in which, faced with any amount of empty time, a brilliant guitarist played by Sean Penn could think to fill it only by shooting rats at the local dump. For Mark and Jimbo, the phrase had come to stand for any dumb, repeated activity.

Jimbo smiled and cast him a sideways look. 'Only I was thinking we could go over to the park, see what's happening over there, you know?'

On summer nights, high school students and hangers-on from all parts of town congregated around the fountain in Sherman Park. Depending on who was there, it could be fun or a little scary, but it was never boring. Ordinarily, the two boys would have walked to the park almost without discussion, understanding that they would see what was going on and take it from there.

'Humor me, all right?' Mark said, startled by the bright pain raised in his heart by the thought of not immediately going back down the alley. 'Come on, look at something with me.'

'This is such bullshit,' Jimbo said. 'But okay, do your thing.'

Mark was already moving down the alley. 'You've seen it a thousand times before, but this time I want you to *think* about it, okay?'

'Yo, I can remember when you used to be sort of fun to hang with,' Jimbo said.

'Yo, I can remember when you still had an open mind.'

'*Fuck* you.'

'No, fuck *you*.'

Feeling obscurely improved by this exchange, they walked down the alley to the point between Mark's backyard and the concrete wall.

'Look at that thing. Just *look* at it.'

'It's a concrete wall, with barbed wire on top.'

'What else?'

Jimbo shrugged. Mark gestured toward the tangle of vines and leaves erupting from the sides of the wall.

'Plus all that crap,' Jimbo said. 'And lots of plants around the sides.'

‘Yeah, the sides. What’s on the sides?’

‘Like fences, or big hedges.’

‘What’s all this stuff for? Why was it put here?’

‘Why? To keep other people off his property.’

‘Take a look at the other houses on this block. What’s different about this one?’

‘You can’t get in there without a hell of a lot of grief.’

‘You can’t even see in,’ Mark said. ‘This is the only house in this whole neighborhood that you can’t see from the alley. Does that tell you anything?’

‘Not really.’

‘The guy who put this up, whoever he was, didn’t want anyone looking at his backyard. That’s what all this stuff is for, to keep people from seeing it.’

‘You’ve been thinking about this way too much,’ Jimbo said.

‘He was hiding something. Look at that humongous wall! Don’t you wonder what his secret was?’

Jimbo stepped backward, his eyes round with disbelief. ‘You’re like the world champion of bullshit. Unfortunately, to you everything you say makes sense. Can we go to the park now?’

In silence, the boys left the northern end of the alley and turned east on Auer Avenue, not an avenue at all but merely another residential street lined with houses and parked cars. Down Auer they proceeded for a single block that offered for their consideration two interracial couples sitting on their respective porches, a sight that so forcefully brought to the boys’ minds what their fathers would have to say about this spectacle that they themselves maintained their silence throughout their turn onto Sherman Boulevard and the one-block trek past the diner, the liquor stores, and the discount outlets to the corner of West Burleigh. Without waiting for the light, they ran across the busy street and continued on into the little park.

A substantial crowd of people milled aimlessly around the dry twenty-foot basin of the fountain. The competing sounds of Phish and Eminem drifted out of two facing boom boxes. Together, Mark and Jimbo noticed the uniformed officer leaning against the patrol car parked off to the side.

As soon as they saw the cop, their way of walking became more self-conscious and mannered. Indicating their indifference to official observation, they dipped their knees, dropped one shoulder, and tilted their heads.

‘Yo, little homeboys,’ the policeman called.

They pretended to take in his presence for the first time. Smiling, the cop waved them forward. ‘Come here, you guys. I want you to look at something.’

The boys lounged toward him. It was like a magic trick: one second the officer’s hands were empty, the next they held up an eight-by-ten black-and-white photograph of a stoner metalhead. ‘Do you know this guy?’

‘Who is he?’ Jimbo asked. ‘He’s in trouble, right?’

‘How about you?’ the cop asked Mark.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.