

SHADOW AND DUST

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WE moved to our old home on North A— Boulevard in a very mild April during a very mild year. The matter of moving the contents of our three-room apartment to the two-story colonial was quick and painless, and the morning was cool but not cold. By noon we had transferred all of the cardboard boxes from the van into their respective chambers, and by two in the afternoon – while the sun gazed lazily into the western windows – the last article of furniture had been deposited. My friends and family sat on the porch and shared the pizza that we laid out on card tables. Coke bottles were passed around and someone opened a bottle of wine that was quickly decanted into blue plastic cups. The house we were moving into was a grey colonial revival with a wide front porch and a cozy backyard where garden lay fallow under a bed of snow-blackened leaves, and a clothes line – two T-shaped wooden frames facing each other, with three ropes slung from one to the other – all under the shade of a grey-skinned silver maple. It came to us as a steal – some \$30,000 under the value of most homes in the neighborhood, with a clean bill of health from the inspector, and scads of perks: brand new lifetime warranty windows, new carpet in the living room, original molding from 1925, hard wood floors in the dining room, and exposed brick walls in the bathroom. It was small – three beds and one bath – but it had all of the charm of a character-drenched fixer-upper with none of the fixes required. The porch needed a rail, and the roof would need shingles in a decade, but it was otherwise in mint condition. The previous owners had poured a shocking amount of care into it before what happened to them. In a quiet place of my heart I almost regretted reaping the rewards of their hard labor so shortly after they had suffered so much. We never met him, of course, but she seemed like a haunted woman when we signed the papers at the lender's, with a look in her eyes like a fish in a trawler looking up at a mallet.

The chatter on our porch had increased its volume incrementally until it poured out into the quiet street and had begun bouncing off of the houses opposite us in gregarious echoes. I looked across the boulevard and was struck by the guarded feeling that these houses had – something sensed, not seen – as if they were standing shoulder to shoulder, watchfully considering us like sentinels who have other thoughts in their minds, but who are never so distracted as to forget the seriousness of their jobs. Something about this impression deeply upset me, and I walked into the house to get away from the juxtaposition of our lively company and the stoic neighborhood.

The door lead into the living room which occupied the right half of the house. To the left was the dining room which lead to the kitchen, and thence to the breakfast nook. The nook jutted from the body of the house, so that the left half of the building was divided into these two rooms. I walked through them, past the boxes, seeking the cool quiet of the basement. The stairs leading down were off of the kitchen. Like so much in the house, they bore the marks of our predecessors: they were made from brand new 2x8 boards and supported by 4x4s with a level of skill that bespoke excellent carpentry. The stairs ended at the far right side of the house – under the living room. The basement consisted of three rooms: a large, open, unfinished, concrete space that precisely replicated the main rectangle of the house excluding the porch and nook. It was here that the heater, washer, dryer, and boiler were. The unfinished ceiling revealed the intricate

systems of copper piping, electrical wiring, and aluminum ductwork that fed life into our home – matted in webs and darkened by dust. Directly across from the stairs is a long, rectangular room that corresponds the porch. Four feet above the ceiling, my family were breaking bread and laughing. It was a dark, old room – a root cellar with a crooked doorway that barely held shut the antique door with its crackled white paint and rusted hinges. It was this room that we had selected for a storage area for Christmas decorations and winter coats. Under the stairs, corresponding precisely with the breakfast nook, was a second, smaller room. It would work well as a pantry, we thought, being too small for regular storage, but too big to be a coat closet. I hadn't looked closely at it during any of the previous times we had been in the home, and something about its removal from my shouting family – being at the most opposite end of the house – and about its fastened door drew my attention. The door was newer than its counterpart in the root cellar, but not by much: the deadbolt looked to be from the '50s, and the blue paint was not as crackled, but it was thin and peeling. Something fell on the porch with a shaking thud and I heard a carillon of laughter. I was reminded of the wine. Turning again to the door, I twisted the bolt back, and it receded with a sharp scrape. I pulled the handle, and the hinges pivoted wearily, exposing the black room to the fresh air. The odor of mushrooms and dampness hung lazily on the other side of the jambs, as if too comfortable to move, but I followed it.

I turned on the light which revealed the pantry cabinets that we had so briefly glanced at during our first walkthrough; we avoided the basement on the second pass – my wife said it seemed dark after a long pause when the realtor asked her (I later learned that this was the room where they found him, with his brains on the wall). They still carried a meager collection of rubbish: empty paint cans, a box of screws – half-empty, a jar of decade-old wax polish – full, several shoeboxes filled with the sort of miscellany that handy men tend to collect in their garages or workshops, three used paintbrushes, baby food jars filled with nuts and bolts, a rusted screw driver, a cardboard Budweiser coaster, a mostly empty can of WD40, half a dozen lighters, a pack of cigarettes, and well-worn rosary. I also found – tucked away, almost hidden on top of the cabinet – a large, black felt hat with a round crown and a wide, circular brim – a slouch hat that reminded me of the Amish men from my hometown in northeastern Indiana. I thought about trying it on. I am glad that I did not. Heavy, awkward, and tediously large – certainly eccentric, almost sinister – I knew that I would never wear it I mentally noted which articles would be pitched, which preserved, and which sold or given away. The hat went into the trash with the lighters and cigarettes and coaster.

As I closed the cabinet doors, I noticed that they still stuck out a bit, as if something was keeping them from shutting all the way. Of course, they were empty now, so I opened them back up and peered inside. After rubbing my hands along the shelves, I noticed that the topmost one was sticking out by a few centimeters. When I couldn't push it back in, I pulled it out towards me, and something soft fell down – which had been wedged between the shelf and the back of the cabinet: a small composition book with marbled black and white covers. The notebook initially fell into the pitching pile; it was warped by moisture – the pages rippled in a serpentine harmony – and the paper was thin and cheap, yellowed with damp, and of no apparent use. It was with a sense of whimsy that I opened it to the first blank page, and perhaps of perversion that I turned over the third, fourth, and fifth blank pages. I knew that there was nothing to be found here – like most notebooks, the first pages had been written on and torn out as needed – but something pushed me to explore beyond the threshold of what seemed realistic or even interesting. I pictured some off-color doodle, some list of people to never speak to again, some confession to a hateful act of vandalism. Or arson. Or murder. I don't know what drove me to anticipate such unwholesome things from such a nondescript pad of paper, but on the twelfth page I found handwriting. I read the first pages in the basement under the yellow glow of the pantry bulb. The

rest I read outside in the sunshine a few days later when I was able to go back into the basement again, but was entirely unwilling to read such words in such a place so intimately related to the other. I have reproduced it, and preface it with a standard warning: what happened to Steve Horton or didn't is not entirely clear, and people under great stress are not the most reliable narrators. In earlier centuries we spoke of madness. Later we used the term nervous breakdown. Most recently we call it a period of mental crisis caused by stress-induced anxiety. I don't know why I feel compelled to qualify his words, and maybe I shouldn't. Maybe I do it because I think his tragedy shouldn't become the object of titillation and morbid glee – a tragedy that may merely be the ramblings of a sick man. Or maybe it's because, after all, I still live in his house.



AUG 13

Doctor Jessica told me I should try this. She thinks that writing out my feelings might help the marriage. It was a while ago that she said that, but me and Ashley just had a pretty bad fight. Sometimes – I'll try this, I guess – I feel like she doesn't care about who I am. It's like she wants me to be a different guy. It frustrates me because I know that her last husband is more what she wants. Someone tough and emotional and loud. But he knocked her around, and I'd never do that. I'd never try to hurt her. Sometimes I get a feeling like I could smack her in the head, but I'll never do that, and it's only when she's screaming at me with that face that she makes. It's not all human. And there's something that really disgusts me about it. It's just kind of half human and half stray dog. If it were just a stray dog, or even a rabid, mad dog, I would be afraid. If it were a fully, human, fully sympathetic face, I would admire it, or even love it. But it's that combination that happens when the screaming is so loud that my ears ring and I stop hearing words. It's a kind of revolting hybrid that I could understand another person seeing and wanting to smack her with a shovel to get her to be quiet and stop making that face. My mom would do that to my dad, and he just sat there like a man being spat all over on by his drill sergeant. Dad was in the Army during Vietnam, and I wonder if that's where he got it. He just sat there and his eyes seemed to recede back into his head like he was going away for a while, and that he would probably be back soon – but maybe he wouldn't. And then there was a day when he didn't. He took a reaming from mom one night while us kids were in bed. God it was loud. And then the door slammed. Now, I thought it was him leaving, but it was really her. We woke up the next day and the house was empty. Mom came home a few hours later, looking really put together and sort of fake-happy. She grinned at us and asked all cheerily where dad was. We didn't know, of course. No one was in the bed or the living room or the bathroom. That's when the cheeriness went away, and her face went sort of white. So she ran out to the backyard to look for his car. I thought he was maybe doing laundry, so I went to the basement – down the steps into the dark. Maybe I'll be able to talk more about this later. I'm going to try to write a little bit whenever I feel like I'm really bottled up. I don't ever like shouting around the kids, and since they're just about never out of earshot (I guess Dr. Jessica is right), I have a lot of things that just go down inside of me and never get aired.

AUG 22

I'm back. I'm keeping this down here because no one likes the basement besides me. Ashley can only do laundry in the middle of the day, and she always has the kids come with her. They don't like it either. It was really weird, actually, when, yesterday, Carly told me that she was worried that the man with the hat wouldn't let her leave the basement if he found her there alone. Now, she's four, so I thought it was pretty hilarious – she watches a lot of Curious George, so I figured it was the Man in the Yellow Hat that she was imagining – but Ashley got really still and

her face got sort of green-grey. I didn't come down here to write about this, so I'm not going to ramble too much more, but it did start the fight, so it's pertinent, or whatever. Ashley grabbed Carly's arm really tight and started asking her a ton of weird questions – how tall was he, what color were his clothes, what did his voice sound like, where did she see him – and that last one really was a big deal to her. She kept asking where she saw him, like it was a lost dog that the whole neighborhood was looking for. Carly doesn't have a great vocabulary, but without taking Ashley there (Ashley refused when I suggested they go down together), Carly indicated she was talking about the root cellar under the porch, opposite of the stairs. I kept shushing Ashley, and tried to pull her away from Carly – the skin of Carly's arms under Ashley's double grip was turning white, and the girl was starting to cry from the pain – but she wouldn't understand that a four year old has an active imagination. Ashley's always been kind of spooky – kind of mystical in a way that tilts between silliness and concern. She has feelings about what people are doing that cause her a lot of stress. One time at the movies she made us leave halfway through because she was really worried about her mom. The woman was in perfect health, and I was almost furious with her for rushing us out of there for such a stupid reason. Coincidentally, her mom had actually been in a car accident just a minute or two after we got in the car. Now she was fine – the car got totaled, but she was all right – but this really bothered me. I think Ashley's too sensitive. Gets too worked up about things.

This kind of so-called “proof” just makes things worse. Last year, when she and the kids moved into this house on North A— (I bought it in a foreclosure three years back, and I've been renovating it ever since), she woke up screaming and begged me not to let the kids go to school that morning. This was the worst “feeling” episode that she ever had, because it seemed to prove to her that she had some second sight. What happened was that the Maumee River overflowed its banks that morning, and the kids' bus was washed off the road. Five kids went to the hospital, and one didn't make it. I told her that it had been storming all night, and everyone knew the roads were bad, and that probably hundreds of mothers had “premonitions” that day, but it just made her worse. So we really got into it over this “man with the hat” thing. I told that it was irresponsible – maybe even dangerous – to frighten the girl. Her eyes just went wide, stupefied by my answer it seemed, like I was saying “go ahead, let the kids play tag with the steak knives.” For a second her eyes seemed to tremble, and then it all bubbled up into her hand. I think I heard the slap before I felt it, but it brought me to the ground, and Carly started screaming. I struggled to get up, and looked over to Ashley, who was holding Carly's face in her hands with a grip that twisted her skin like a melted rubber mask. “Never, ever let me ever hear that you went down there alone. Do you hear me? If I ever, ever find out that you went down there, I'll make sure you can't sit on your ass for a week. Do you hear me, girl?” Carly's head jiggled up and down between the vice of Ashley's hands. “He's a bad man, Carly. He's a very, very bad man, and he does very, very bad things. He will do bad things to you if you don't let me protect you. If you ever see him again – and if you EVER see him upstairs – you have to tell me. You have to tell me, or he might do bad things to you and the babies.” Carly's eyes got big. “And Ethan, too?” Her six year old brother was upstairs with our newborn and the toddler. Ashley got really quiet. I saw the animal come out in her, but in a different way. In a way I had seen in cats who are chased into a corner after angering their owner, or in the rabbit which I found cowering from me when I accidentally blocked its exit route from my garage. It was a type of animal fear. “Yes, Ethan too. And you and Jackie, and even little Owen.” Her grip relaxed on the girl's face. Carly looked over to me. “What about daddy? Will the man do a bad thing to daddy?” I've seen many strange, complicated expression on my wife's face.

She is a passionate woman and has a way of driving me crazy in all sorts of ways. Her great-grandmother came over here from the dark Welsh mountains, her great-great-grandfather from

the dry hill country of Northern Spain, and her paternal great-great-grandparents left the lonely pine forests of Hungary. One of her ancestors was a French gypsy who disappeared without a trace in the Appalachian Mountains (they said he heard a call and left to answer it), and one was an Egyptian doctor in Napoleon's army who escaped to Louisiana after the British beat them at the Nile. There's very hot blood in her. I don't really know why I even said that, but looking at her in that moment, I felt like generations of evolution and instinct and self-preservation flashed in her eyes. Her face was this odd mixture of emotions. After a really tense silence, she looked away from me and said "I hope not." I had almost forgotten that I was recently knocked to the kitchen floor. Something in her was so odd and frightening and confident. I felt like another one of her children, as if the slap had been a cautionary spanking. I left the room and felt my own emotions kind of drain into my heart. I came down here tonight because I realized that I've promised myself not to let that happen. So I've written about it. But I can hear the kids calling for me, and Ashley would really not like to know that I was down here for so long by myself (I know it's silly, but "happy wife, happy life," right? And even if she's superstitious, I'd rather she have peace of mind than be a jumble of nerves).

SEPT 1

It was Labor Day today. I don't have much to write about. Our families came over for a cookout and Ashley really embarrassed me when my mom asked to see the basement. She said that it isn't a healthy place. I don't know why she tells people weird shit like that. My mom asked if it had mold. I does - some. Ashley doesn't know that, though. I write these notes down here in the little room where I keep my tools and knickknacks. She never comes here - hint, hint - so I figure it's a safe spot to keep my "feeling journal" (by the way, I talked to Dr. Jessica about it while Ashley was paying our counselling bill, and she thought it was a good idea; she wants me to not hide it from Ashley, but she said it might be good for me to have an emotional outlet, she called it). This place has mildew and mold and stuff on the walls, so I don't stick around very long, but - like I was saying - she doesn't know that. She looks at my mom and says "it has a poisonous energy." What the hell does that mean? My mom turns around and nods like it makes sense - she and my mom have a lot in common, and even though my mom isn't the mystical type, she has a weird respect for Ashley's random whims - but my sister gave her a look that said everything I was thinking. Later she asked me if we have considered medication for her bipolar disorder. We have, and sometimes we do, but right now the insurance isn't there for it, and so she's off the dope. My sister urged me to do something about it. She thinks that the basement has become what she called an "I.D. fix" [sic], or a fixating obsession, and that she might do some harm if she isn't dealt with. My sister of course remembers what happened to dad, and even though she isn't a psychiatrist, she is a nurse who works with some pretty messed up people. I didn't tell Ashley about any of this. I never would. I need them to get along. The families left and everything seemed all right, but I think I'm really annoyed about something. I couldn't fall asleep, so I waited until I heard her snoring, and I left the bed to come down here. After all of Ashley's nuttiness it makes me feel brave in a half-joking way to come down here in the wee hours while everyone else is asleep. But not really. It's dark even with the lights on, but it's just a basement after all. No sign of the man with the hat, haha. That's about it. I should wrap this up and go back upstairs. If Ashley ever found out that I went down here she would - well, I don't know what. But she'd not be pleasant to be around.

SEPT 9

I came down here tonight because I couldn't sleep. Everything is going well between Ashley and I since Labor Day, so I don't know if there's really anything worth reporting. Maybe that is worth reporting - that we might be happy right now, and maybe we have a chance. I keep asking myself why I can't sleep, though. I'm worried, but I don't know about what. There's this sense that

I have that we are being cased. I keep the .38 in my bedside table, and whenever I come down here (I come down a few nights each week and just sit. I don't always write, but tonight my mind seems like it's on the brink of something) I bring it with me – just in case. When I first bought the house I was mugged in the driveway, and I've never gone outside at night without my pistol. It has a sort of comfortable weight even though it's so small. That's the part about it that gives me the most peace whenever I think I'm seeing shadows moving along our fence, or hear slow steps easing along the flower beds – the weight of it. It's a reassuring thing to know that if a face were to slowly slide past the jamb of the door – I have such a clear picture of it (it starts out as just a bit of wispy hair that I barely notice, then a scalp catches the corner of my eye, then a grey, dry forehead followed by... God, I can't even talk about the eyes and what expression the mouth has). I guess it's nice to know that when I look up from writing to see him watching me like an escaped convict peering into a girl's steamy shower – God, I even thought I saw a shadow on this paper, like something was reading over my shoulder – I could smash its face open with a good squeeze of my finger.

SEPT 11

I honestly think Ashley's becoming contagious to the kids. As much as we're getting along, I have to say it pisses me off when they get scared because of her delusions. None of them will go downstairs to play when I tell them to clear out. It's too hot outside for them to mess around in the backyard, and the basement is like an ice box even in August, so I told them to stop running underfoot and to take their games to the basement. I can't even describe the way they reacted. I hate to think of the expression Ethan gave me – and I had expected him to have a head on his shoulders, being older and a boy. But his face – it was a look that I don't think I want to put words to. Something to forget. Something wrong for a boy his age to be feeling in a circumstance like that. It was as if – this is the only way I can express it – he was standing on a gallows and the noose had just been fit around his throat. The girl was even worse. I left the house. I've never been so ashamed of them.

SEPT 21

I came down here as soon as I heard her start to snore. It's becoming a bit of a nightly ritual. That might sound weird, but I'm sure that most men with a family will understand. My backyard neighbor spends all of his time in his tool shed, even in the winter. He plays a revolting country station, drinks beer and whiskey by himself, and keeps the door open. I hope he has some kind of a heater in that 10x4 clubhouse of his. There is no heater down here, though, so I don't know why I'm teasing him. It's cold, even in the summer it's enough to give you goosebumps. But I need a pressure valve, or I don't know what I'd do. I sometimes think I never really became a man – that I'm inadequate, a kind of half-developed child. I still feel the same way I did when my mom went outside to look for my dad and I went into the basement. I turn on the light and walk down the steps, and I can already smell his waste, and I know that I'm about to know something that my momma is supposed to protect me from, but I want to be big, I want to shoulder the pain that I somehow know is supposed to be kept from me, and even though every nerve in my body is revolting against the action, every muscle under my flesh keeps moving me forward, forward, down the steps, one by one, and I want to protect my mom from the feeling that has prickled my skin with terror, but I also want to be protected. I still haven't grown up from that day. I was half child and half man, and even though it was a huge leap then – I felt like a giant compared to my friends – it seems like such a depreciation now. I feel dwarfed and unmanned. I think I'm going to just turn the light out and try meditating down here. Dr. Jessica said that could help me when I feel these things.

OCT 2

This evening Ashley and I sent the kids to my mom's. We had the house all to ourselves, for the first time in six months, and we made love in a way that seemed to open all of the closed doors in our minds. It felt like airing out a house on the first warm day of spring, like fresh, dry, clean air was rushing through the stuffy rooms that have been locking up our relationship. Like sunlight was drying up all the mildew and rot and new air was gushing in through our pores. I felt the blood bursting through my arms and face and heart, bringing in oxygen and life to the flesh of my body that has been feeling so cold and dead for months. I've felt like a dirty shirt that gets dropped in the back of a closet and lays there for weeks in the shadow and dust, and for the first time in ages it was like I had been found, shaken out, washed, and pinned up on the clothesline in the summer air. She fell asleep an hour ago, and I left her naked in our bed to write about this wonderful feeling. I slipped into my robe and came down here after thinking about it for awhile – I figured since it was such a strong feeling that I should write about it – but now I'm wishing I had put on slippers and pajama pants. Now that summer is officially over, I'm starting to realize how cold it gets down here. For as much time as I spend here most nights, I think I should invest in a space heater. Anyway, I just thought that after all the stressful feelings and anger and confusion, it would be nice to talk about this wonderful rush of life that we just shared. The lightbulb is flickering pretty wildly down here (it actually went for half a minute just as I finished that last sentence), so I think I'm going to end it here and go back upstairs to her.

OCT 8

Today was the first frost of the year. I really do think I am going to get a space heater down here. It gets terribly cold even in the day, even in the summer. I do all the actual washing and drying now because – thanks again to Ashley – the kids are terrified to be down here. They keep having nightmares about the man in the hat. Ashley, of course, won't even walk past the basement stairwell without holding her breath and looking at the ground, like some fucking little school girl. Yesterday night – or this morning, really – Ethan came into our room sobbing girlishly about this monster Ashley's created. He had a dream that every night the man gets out of the ground in the root cellar and walks up the basement steps, he checks the doors to make sure they're locked, then he turns to the stairs and walks up those without making any noise, and every night he stands on the landing and looks into each bedroom. First he looks into the girl's room, for a long time – looking at the bed and the girl in it – then he moves to Ethan's room, watching him for a long time – looking at the bed and the girl in it – then he moves to our room, watching us for a long time – looking at the bed and the couple in it – then he takes a step forward and walks soundlessly to my side of the bed and does something with his hand, and looks down at me for a long time, then he touches his neck under the chin like he is feeling for swollen lymph nodes or pressing lightly on a healing bruise – gingerly and thoughtfully – and then Ethan wakes up. He says this is the fifth time that he has had this dream, and I couldn't hold my anger in anymore because he was saying this in front of Ashley, who I have to be as protective of as Carly (you know, like keeping her from having nightmares and turning the station if a show gets too scary). Ashley was sitting up in bed staring at him, and I told him to stop it. I realize now that hitting him was horribly incorrect – I sent him to the floor when he didn't stop screaming about this boogey man of his – and Ashley (who has no trouble sending me to the floor) kicked me out of bed and made all the kids come into our room to sleep with her. I'm sure none of them are asleep. I'm sure they're all self-perpetuating their delusions now that I've been banished and all common sense is gone. I brought a blanket to the couch but went downstairs to write about this because I'm almost fed up with this.

Near Dawn, Same Morning

I had a strange dream. I suppose that's something I might as well admit – that is, that I've been having many strange dreams lately. Doctor Jessica says she doesn't buy into Freud or Jung.

She says that dreams mean nothing and that there's nothing to our unconscious minds other than the odd wish fulfillment. I'd like to think that she's right, but I'm going to write this down just to get it out of my head. Like I said earlier, I was pretty steamed with Ashley and the kids, so I slept downstairs. Well, it wasn't long before I was asleep. Now, both in our room and in the living room we have these salt rock lamps; they're orangey-pink rocks with light bulbs in them that stay on 24/7. Ashley thinks they disemmanate [sic] some kind of healthy vapor that keeps us well – her hippie sister swears by them. Anyway, they have a soft, orange light that is dim enough for us to sleep, but bright enough to see the room by. Well, in my dream I opened my eyes to darkness and it really spooked me. I didn't realize it was a dream, and I knew that if I opened my eyes to darkness it meant I was neither in the bedroom where I should be sleeping, or in the living room where I had been sleeping – no salt lamp light. Instead, I was in almost complete blackness. I was laying down on my back on what felt like old, uneven concrete. The air was thick and moldy, and my lungs stung each time I inhaled. I don't know how, but I had the feeling that something I wanted to hurt was above me, separated by space – as though, if I could levitate directly upwards – through matter and space – I would be standing beside something I wanted to do bad things to. But this is the weird thing – I didn't levitate, even though it was a dream and I could have. Instead, I stood up slowly. My feet were bare, and I felt more uneven concrete with cracks and warps in it, but I began to walk in spite of the blindness, and eventually my feet felt rough wooden steps – and I began to rise from the cold thick air into cool, clean air. I now began to see light – from a street lamp, through a window – and feel tiles, and then hard wood. I moved on and was in a room covered in thick carpet that rubbed coarsely on my feet, lit dimly by a cold orange light coming from one corner. I was now at the foot of another stair – this one covered with the same carpet – and was climbing it, moving towards the thing I wanted to stop and hurt. A landing. Another flight of steps? No, only three, then a landing and a hallway. Three doors. Each holds an enemy. Each needs to be entered and dominated with my will. I know where to start. I open the door. The light is orange and dim – not too dim: I can make out the bed. It has two oblong shapes in it. I know what to do. I know who they are. I know the closest one best. He knows me – has always known me. I reach my hand to him – in the orange light I can see my hand; the skin is not a wholesome color. I know why that is, and he – if he understood – could tell you why, too.

This is all I remember.

OCT 10

I have never been so afraid. Not afraid like Ashley and the kids – of boogeymen and witches – but of my body and mind. This morning, around four, I woke up looking at my house. I was outside in my pajamas, standing on the pavement, and my heart was pounding as if I had been in a sprint. I opened my eyes to see it there – dark yellow in the sour lamplight, with its black window-eyes and its door open like a hungry mouth. Why was I outside? What was my intention? Where were the kids? I mounted the porch and entered my home like a thief or an insurgent – as unaware of its contents as the driver who passes by it on his way from another city to another city. I was now in darkness, except for the salt lamp I wrote about earlier. Orange light smoothed away some of the shadows. But what was this? Something standing at the foot of the stairs – black and menacing and postured towards me with square shoulders and a tilted, lolling head. I took a step towards it like a man ready to throw himself into the arms of a cougar as a sacrifice to distract it from his family. But it was all shadow and dust – nothing more. But then there were footsteps, pounding and desperate – did they come from below me or above me, I wondered. But it was a senseless fancy – of course they were from above. And now they were on the stairs, and there was Ashley with a bat, and my spirit fermented with love and hate as she made eye contact with me – long, deep eye-contact, full of recognition – before she heaved the bat overhead and swung it into my ribs with all her weight. And then she was on top of me, but this time I felt her tears and her

hot face rubbing against my cold skin. She held me like a little boy whose mother has just given him a beating for running away: my body ached, but by soul felt wanted.

OCT 12

More strange dreams. More sleep walking. This morning, around four, I woke up and didn't know where I was. I looked down and saw Ethan sleeping under his race-car blanket. My first thought was that he was too old for that kind of thing; I thought about how I sometimes resented him and resented how Ashley sometimes made me feel and look like less of a man around him; resented how my son couldn't possibly respect me. I respected my dad up until I found him in our basement – found him with his bladder and bowels released (people don't realize bodies do that after death; I guess I knew because it had happened to our cat when we put it to sleep, so I wasn't surprised) and his neck and tongue and eyes... Well, at any rate, I looked down at him and saw the curse of my masculinity – a failed god watching over the worshipper who will one day rebel and replace him – and I raised my hand to my face to stifle angry sobs. I felt something soft. I was holding my flannel bathrobe belt – wrapped tightly around my hand. The other end was wrapped around by left hand, leaving two feet of slack in between. It was odd, too, because I wasn't even wearing my robe. Something about this materiality – the real, non-dream-world sensations of touch and logic – brought me fully awake and I looked back down at Ethan. I realized that the reason I resented those cars was because I was so afraid of the day that he would become a man – the day when he would no longer be in my protection. I wanted him to be young forever. I didn't want to disappoint him. I loved him so, so much. I didn't want him to wake up and see a man looking at him, so I checked the windows, closed his door, and went down here to write about it.

OCT 20

Things have been great with Ashley all week. I can't believe how much our work with Dr. Jessica has helped. I've never felt closer to her or the kids. I think I might be able to wrap this journal up soon. I just wish I could get better sleep. Three nights out of seven I wake up and I'm sleep walking. Usually I'm heading towards the basement or just leaving it. I have no clue why my sleep-self is so determined to go there (especially now; as the seasons move on it's become less of a cool retreat from the sun and more of a reeking ice-box) other than the fact that it's kind of become my man-cave. Dr. Jessica thinks it might represent something to me from my childhood (and she said she didn't care for Freud) – something that I either want to return to, to hide from the future, or need to return to, to confront the past.

OCT 22

Another weird sleep walk to the kids' room. This time I woke up around 3:30 and I was standing over Carly. This time was better, though. I just felt some confusion, and then I was glad that she seemed to be sleeping well. I had a little jump when I looked up at her vanity mirror (one of the shadows in the room was shaped like a man, so that when I saw my reflection it looked like someone was standing behind me), but I went to bed and tried to find some sleep. Odd thing, though: when I sat down I felt something hard in my pocket – it was my dad's old Army pocket knife. I went to put it back in the cigar box where I keep relics like that, but before I did I found that it had something stuck in it. I opened the blade. Bits of hair. I felt in my pajama pocket. I found a lock of Carly's blond hair. I flushed it down the toilet. It was a small enough lock that Ashley won't notice it, but if she ever knew what I did in my sleep, I can't imagine what she'd do.

OCT 27

Ashley gets worse during Halloween season. She reads more and listens to podcasts, and all of her podcasts and books are the same: spiritualist, mystical, hippy-dippy bullshit. I'm not a religious man or a spiritual one (Ashley is both). I haven't been to a church or a séance in decades, plural. I don't go to my children's baptisms or funeral services. I believe in science, in reason, in logic and sense and physics. I put up with Ashley's provincial superstitions because I care about

her and I don't want to put her down or insult her intelligence, but when she takes the kids and leaves the house... Well, I just don't what to do about it. I've endured all the talk about her French gypsy ancestor who was spirited away by the Wendigo in the Tennessee hill country, and the Egyptian metaphysician who deserted Napoleon to become a voodoo priest, the Welsh witch, the Spanish medium, and the Hungarian alchemist. All of them can go to hell. She's left. She found out about the sleep walking. I was dumb enough to explain it when she noticed the gash in Carly's hair (it was easy to miss, but she was testing out a princess hairdo for her Halloween costume and found it). She told me that the kids won't even tell her about their nightmares anymore (probably for the best: her hysteria is what's feeding them). Ethan said the man in the hat now stands at the end of his bed with his back to the street light and watches him without moving, with his head rolled awkwardly to the side. Ashley said she had a nightmare that she was too ashamed (she was: she blushed to her roots) of to tell even to me. She just said that it was a hideous thing to imagine happening to a woman in a room across the hall from her sleeping children, or to any woman. She won't spend the "Hallow-Mass" in the same house as "that basement with that man." She's taking them across town to her cousin's, and she had the gall to ask me to leave with them. As if I would leave my home for a whole week to hide from a child's dream.

OCT 29

The house is quiet now. Once I refused to join her and the kids, Ashley went livid and won't answer my calls anymore. She thought a night alone would put "sense into my head" (as if that's something I LACK and she has a SURPLUS of. Ha!!), but when I still stood firm, she wailed over the phone and muttered something about "understanding it now," as if she had just solved a puzzle that she didn't like the answer to. I say she went livid, but it was really more of wailing and moaning, not so much anger. But I have to be a good example to the kids. When they're older I'll teach them to love their mom, but to take her superstitions to the curb. It'll be a sad thing for her to deal with, but the kids have to learn that this kind of stuff leads to a mushy intellect. Before she hung up - between the hysterics - she wanted to know how I was sleeping. I said fine. And I was. The other night I woke up only once (good compared to last week) to find myself standing at the top of the basement stairs, looking down.

[At this point the writing changes. It becomes more scraggly and rushed. Some words have to be guessed at. He no longer records dates, although police evidence suggests that they all occur between the evening of October 30 and the early morning hours of All Souls Day, November 2].

Was startled awake just before falling asleep, and now I can't sleep. I was closing my eyes (I've mentioned my bedroom has a salt lamp that's always on, even when we sleep), when something passed between me and the lamp. I know because even with my eyes closed, my eyelids let in a very dim, red glow. Just seconds after I closed them, my eyelids went black for a second, then back to red. I shot up and looked around, but there was nothing there so I went back to the pillow and closed my eyes. Cozy, soft red light - then black, as if someone had walked in front of the lamp - a lamp that is four feet to my left. I tried to ignore it, but - have you ever felt like you were closing your eyes to avoid seeing something that might be there? It's a sort of Schrodinger's cat allegory: while your eyes are closed, something is both there and not there. Well, I kept my eyes closed all night, and didn't sleep for a second.

[The following appears to be a separate entry]

There is a man in a hat that comes out of the basement to look at me and my family when they are asleep.

He is tall with wide shoulders. It is hard to explain how he's dressed - I can't even explain what kind of hat he has, if you can believe that. He is a periphery blur - an imposing, towering thing that stands between me and the light. I fell asleep from exhaustion today around five in the

afternoon. It is a very dry, very overcast day – dark well through two or three – with lots of shadow and dust hanging in the air. I fell asleep sitting on the couch. When I woke up, an hour later, I was standing at the top of the basement stairs, looking down into its darkness. Some scant rays of sickly light glinted on the steps and wall, but it was terribly murky. I almost turned away – I was used to the tableau, after all, and just assumed it was what Dr. Jessica had said: I kept returning to the basement to hide from the stresses of the future – of my strained marriage, of my impressionable son, of my insecurities and fears. But as my eyes adjusted to the darkness they were considering immersing in, I saw its outline, and the white face under the brim was just lit well enough from the sides to indicate the heavy jaw, sharp cheeks, and hard nose. Everything else was muddled in darkness under the brim of a black hat, and swallowed up in clothes that were impossible to make out for their dark color. It was as if he rose up from the floor of that place, like he was another extension of it – another shadow caught in its deepness – and for a moment I thought I was looking at my reflection, and I don't know which thought was more horrifying. It was a face that – even though I couldn't see it – seemed familiar and instinctive, like the face of an old bully which has been changed by aged, but immediately taps into its archetype in your imagination, or hearing the voice of a strict teacher at your hometown supermarket twenty years after you've last seen them, but immediately feeling fear and submission surge in your spirit.

I ran as quickly as I could to the closet and found my gun in the shoebox at the top. The bullets were in a box on top of the fridge, and I flung on the lights, charging down the stairs with a loaded revolver and a deep sense of denial. I knew that it was not a burglar, but I couldn't sleep another second in a house with my children's nightmare loose in it, and I desperately threw myself around corners, under the stairs, into crannies, and behind storage bins, hoping to see a crouching felon or an armed lunatic, but there was nothing.

I've brought my journal back with me. If I need to say anything, I won't be able to do it if it's in the basement. I can't bring myself to go there again.

I'm checking into a motel. My cell is dead now, and Ashley has both chargers. I don't know where her cousin lives.

[Another separate entry is supposed here, although there is, again, no date]

I don't know what to do. I don't know where to turn. I don't know who to ask for help. I checked into a motel across town. Fifteen minutes ago, I woke up in my bed on North A—Boulevard. I had my clothes on and a receipt from the motel desk. The key card is not with me. I think I turned it in. Our bed faces the doorway, and I can see out into the landing. Our room is still bathed in soft orange light, and the door is opened – a black rectangle. But it is not an empty vacuum – he is there, standing just at the threshold, just barely casting his shadow on the jambs and carpet, but he is there. And I can hear him. Gibbering, squeaking, gargling through his crushed throat – mumbled, rubbery laughter that is just loud enough to be heard, just soft enough to be written off, but I have no doubt. And now I know. Now I am convinced. Like Ashley, I understand. I am too afraid to get up to turn on the lights. I am writing this by the salt lamp only. God knows if it's even legible, but I need to have it written. I need to have something to do other than think. For the first time in my life I can't find any comfort in my mind – it seems as much a fragile wonderland of moonlight, fog, and cobwebs as Ashley's superstitions. And those are no comfort either. I don't know anything about them, but I don't think they are powerful enough for this thing. I tried to recite the Lord's Prayer. But I don't know the words.

I fell asleep. I didn't mean to. I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I want to protect my kids. I know what will happen if they come back here tomorrow and I'm still alive. I'm not to be me, if they come. I'm not to be myself. I'm to be something else, something older, something

deader, something I've known all my life – and hated. I know who he is. I know what he is. I know what he wants. He wants more of what he started, more of what he buried in me – a corpse or a seed? – that day that I found him twisting in slow circles by his belt. It wasn't her that he hated. It was me. It was me, just like I looked down on Ethan and saw the breathing, dreaming embodiment of everything that I had failed at – and everything that I stood to continue to fail at. I fell asleep. I woke up in the spare room under the office where I had been coming for so many weeks – the man-cave, the retreat, the sanctuary. Now it's the palace of my terrors. Dr. Jennifer was right. But I didn't initiate the confronting, so I've lost the power. I've lost. I woke up in pitch darkness and crawled out on my hands and knees, shivering, crying, terrified. I found the stairs and stood to make a dash for the door, but now I was standing at the foot of the steps... and he was there, looking down at me from the top – looking with his wrenched neck and cocked head. I left before he could take a step down. I don't think my mind could survive seeing him move, and so far I haven't. I found my way back here and turned on the bulb. It is a low light, but it is the greatest comfort to me.

I have one more comfort. I have this journal, which I am going to hide here for Ashley to find. If he finds it – if he becomes me – he will destroy it. I love you, Ashley, and I love our babies. I'm so sorry. So sorry. So sorry. So sorry. I have to face him. You know that. Knew that. Understood that. Now I have to go to him, otherwise our babies will be in danger. They already are. Already have been – of being garroted, having their throats opened – and so have you – I can't even imagine, don't ever want to imagine, in what manner. And he doesn't live here in this house. That's why he found me at the motel. He lives with me. Wherever I go. Anywhere I hide, he will find the cold, dark basement in my life, and make camp there. He will sleep and strengthen and hibernate until he is able to climb the stairs and find me. And when he finds me, he will find you. I can't let him do that, but I'm so scared. I'm so, so scared. I have only one chance to escape now, because I am his prisoner in this basement. He stood at the top of the stairs. I've since heard him move down it step by step, and even now I know he is within reach of the door here. I have one chance to protect you from him – from me. I still have the pistol. I can still defend you and our dears. But I have to stop writing. I see darkness piling at the door, and every time I look up, I imagine I see its white face sliding into view. And I can't see that. I can't survive that. To see that expression, to see those eyes – things that I've been lucky to have hidden from me – my mind can't survive that. But my body can. And I can't let that happen either. Only a few more words then I have to hide this away from him. I feel him on the other side of the door, and I know that at any moment I'm going to look up and see h—

