

A Few Years Back, Late Spring

The great revelations of my adult life began with the shouts of a lost soul in my neighborhood breakfast joint.

I was standing in line at the Corner Bakery on State and Cedar, half a block down the street from my pretty brick townhouse, waiting to order a Swiss Oatmeal (muesli) or a Berry Parfait (granola), anyhow something modest. The loudest noises in the place were the tapping of laptop keys and the rustle of someone turning newspaper pages. Abruptly, with a manic indignation that seemed to come from nowhere, the man at the head of the line started uttering the word *obstreperous*. He started out at a level just above ordinary conversation. By the time he found his rhythm, he was about twice that volume and getting louder as he rolled along. If you had to settle on one word to yell over and over in public, wouldn't you pick something less cumbersome? Yet he kept at it, spinning those four lumpy syllables every possible way, as if trying them on for size. His motive, for nothing actually comes from nowhere, soon became obvious.

Obstreperous? ObSTREPerous? OBSTREPEROUS? Ob-strep?-ER-ous? OBstreperous?

Lady, you think I'm obstreperous now? This is what he was saying. *Give me another thirty seconds, you'll learn all about obstreperous.*

With each repetition, his question grew more heated. The momentarily dumbfounded young woman at the order counter had offended him, he wished her to know how greatly. The guy also thought he was making himself look smart, even witty, but to everyone else in the shop he had uncorked raving lunacy.

His variations were becoming more imaginative.

Obstreeperous? Obstraperous? ObstrapOROUS?

To inspect this dude, I tilted sideways and looked down the good-sized line. I almost wished I hadn't.

Right away, it was obvious that the guy was not simply playing around. The next man in line was giving him six feet of empty floor space. Under the best of circumstances, people were going to keep their distance from this character. Eight or nine inches of white-gray hair surged out in stiff waves around his head. He was wearing a torn, slept-in checked suit that might have been ripped off a cornfield scarecrow. Through a latticework of scabs, smears, and bruises, his swollen feet shone a glaring, bloodless white. Like me, he had papers under his elbow, but the wad of newsprint he was clamping to his side appeared to have lasted him at least four or five days. The puffed-up bare feet, scuffed and abraded like shoes, were the worst part.

"Sir?" said the woman at the order counter. "Sir, you need to leave my store. Step away from the counter, sir, please. You need to step away."

Two huge kids in Southern Illinois sweatshirts, recent graduates by the look of them, jammed their chairs back and marched straight toward the action. This is Chicago, after all, where big, athletic-looking dudes sprout out of the sidewalks like dandelions on a suburban lawn. Without speaking to anyone, they came up on the homeless guy's flanks, hoisted him by his elbows, and transported him outside. If he had gone limp, they would have had a little trouble, but he was rigid with panic and gave them no more difficulty than would a cigar store Indian. He went stiff as a marble statue. When he

went by, I took in his blubbery lips and brown, broken teeth. His bloodshot eyes had a glazed look. The man kept saying, *obstreperous obstreperous obstreperous*, but the word had become meaningless to him. He was using it for protection, like a totem, and he thought as long as he kept saying it, he was out of danger.

When I looked into those flat, unseeing eyes, an utterly unforeseen thought jolted me. The impact felt like a blow, and brought with it a cryptic sense of illumination as brief as the flaring of a match.

I knew someone like that. This terrified man with a one-word vocabulary reminded me so vividly of someone that he might have *been* that person, now in the act of being ejected onto Rush Street. But . . . who in the world could it have been? No one I knew was anything like the damaged character now staggering forward and back on the sidewalk beyond the great windows, still whispering his totemic word.

A voice only I could hear said, *No one? Think again, Lee*. Deep in my chest, something big and decisive—something I had been ignoring and thrusting out of view literally for decades—stirred in its sleep and twitched its leathery wings. Whatever had nearly awakened tasted, in part, like shame, but shame was by no means all of it.

Although my first response was to turn away from whatever was causing my internal tumult (and turn away I did, with as much of my native resolve as I could summon), the memory of having witnessed an inexplicable illumination clung to me like a cat that had jumped onto my back and stuck its claws into my skin.

The next thing I did involved a typical bit of unconscious misdirection—I tried to believe that my distress was caused by the register girl’s stupid language. Maybe that sounds snobbish, and maybe it is snobbish, but I’ve written eight novels, and I pay attention to the way people use words. Maybe too much attention. So when I finally stood in front of the young woman who had told that ruined creature that he “needed” to leave her “store,” I expressed my unhappiness by ordering an Anaheim Scrambler,

which comes with smoked bacon, cheddar cheese, avocado, and a lot of other stuff including hash browns, and a corn muffin, too. (Alas, I am one of those people who tend to use food as a way of dodging unwelcome emotions.) Anyhow, when did people start framing commands in terms of neediness? And how long had people in the restaurant business been calling their establishments “stores”? Couldn’t people see the ugliness and inaccuracy of this crap? The creature within me rolled back into its uneasy sleep, temporarily lulled.

I parked myself at an empty table, snapped open my paper—the *Guardian Review*—and avoided looking at the big front windows until I heard one of the staff bringing my tray to me. For some reason, I turned around and glanced through the window, but of course that wretched, half-sane character had fled. Why did I care what had happened to him, anyhow? I didn’t, apart from feeling a sort of generic pity for his suffering. And that poor devil did not remind me of anyone I knew or had once known. For a couple of seconds, a kind of misguided *déjà vu* had come into play. Nobody thought of *déjà vu* as anything except a momentary delusion. It gave you an odd buzz of recognition that felt like occult knowledge, but the buzz was psychic flotsam, of no value whatsoever.

Forty-five minutes later, I was walking back to my house, hoping that the day’s work would go well. The minor disturbance in the Corner Bakery hardly counted even as a memory anymore, except for the moment when I was sliding my key into the front-door lock and saw once again his glassy, bloodshot eyes and heard him whispering *obstreperous obstreperous*. “I need you to stop doing that,” I said out loud, and tried to smile as I stepped into my bright, comfortable foyer. Then I said, “No, I do *not* know anyone even faintly like you.” For half a second, I thought someone was going to ask me what I was talking about, but my wife was on an extended visit to Washington, D.C., and in the whole of my splendid house, not a single living thing could hear me.

Work, unfortunately, was of no use at all. I had been planning to use the days my wife was gone to get a jump-start on a new novel then known as

Her Level Gaze. Never mind the total lameness of the title, which I intended to change as soon as I came up with a better one. Atop my oversized desk, a folder bulging with notes, outlines, and ideas for chapters sat beside my iMac, and a much smaller folder beside it held the ten awkward pages I had managed so far to excrete. Once I started poking it, the novel that had seemed so promising when still a shimmer of possibility had turned into a slow-moving, snarling animal. The male protagonist seemed to be a bit slow-moving, too. Although I did not want to admit it, the main character, the young woman with the disconcertingly level gaze, would have eaten him for breakfast in a single bite.

At the back of my mind was a matter I did not actually want to think about that day, a far too tempting suggestion made some years ago, God, maybe as many as five, by David Garson, my agent, who told me that my publisher had, who knows how seriously, proposed to him over lunch that at least once I should write a nonfiction book, not merely a memoir, but a book *about* something.

“Lee,” David said, “don’t get paranoid on me, he wasn’t saying he wanted you to stop writing novels, of course he wasn’t. They think you have an interesting way of seeing things, that’s their main point here, and they think it might be useful if just once, and I mean *just once*, Lee Harwell could turn this reader-friendly yet challenging *trait* of his onto some event in the real world. The event could be huge, or it might be something smaller and more personal. He added that he thought a book like that would probably do you some good in the marketplace. He has a point there, actually. I mean, I think it’s an extraordinarily interesting idea. Do you want to consider it? Why don’t you just mull it over for a couple of days, see what occurs to you? I mean, just as a suggestion.”

“David,” I said, “no matter what my intentions are, everything I write winds up turning into fiction, including my letters to friends.” Yet David is a good guy, and he does look out for me. I promised to think about it, which was disingenuous of me because in fact I already had been turning over the

possibility of doing a nonfiction book. An unpublished and unpublishable manuscript I had come across on eBay a couple of months earlier, a kind of memoir by a Milwaukee homicide detective named George Cooper, seemed to crack open an old, officially unsolved series of murders that had much interested my friends and me when we were in grade school and high school. Of even greater interest to me right now was that these “Ladykiller” homicides appeared to have an at least tangential connection to a dark matter that involved these friends of mine, including the amazing girl who became my wife, though not me, in our last year in high school. But of that I did not wish to think—it involved a young man named Keith Hayward who had been, it seemed, a sick, evil child tutored in his sickness and evil by a truly demonic figure, his uncle. All of that was in the sort-of memoir Detective Cooper had written out in his cursive, old-school hand, and even as I put the story together I was determined to resist the gravitational pull it worked on me. The immense theological question of evil felt too great, too complex to address with the tools and weapons I possessed. What I knew best had only to do with stories and how they proceeded, and a mere instinct for narrative wasn’t enough to take on the depths of the Hayward story. That my wife and our friends had come in contact with creepy Keith Hayward also put me off.

At the usual hour of one-thirty, hunger pulled me into the kitchen, where I put together a salad, warmed up some soup, and made half a sandwich with pumpernickel bread, Black Forest ham, coleslaw, and Russian dressing. Dinah Lion, my assistant, who would otherwise have been present, did not come in on Mondays, so the isolation of morning remained intact. Dinah would be gone for the next 10 days or so, also, in an arrangement we had worked out with my accountants that was going to let her join her parents in Tuscany at half pay in exchange for some juggling with the vacation she normally took in August.

For some reason, the second I sat down before my solitary little meal, I felt like weeping. Something vital was slipping away from me, and for once this sense wasn’t just a fantasy about the novel I was writing. The huge wave

of sadness building up within me was connected to something more critical than *Her Level Gaze*; it was something I had lived with for much longer than I had my foundering book. Tears steamed up into my eyes and trembled there. For an excruciating moment, I was in the ridiculous position of grieving for a person, a place, or a condition that remained hidden from me. Someone I loved had died when we were both very young—that's what it felt like—and I had committed the dim-witted crime of never stopping to mourn that loss until just now. This must have been the source of the shame I tasted before I started ramming scrambled eggs, avocado, and cheddar cheese into my mouth. *I had let this person disappear.*

At the thought of the breakfast I had forced down my throat in the Corner Bakery, my hunger curdled. The food on the table looked poisoned. Tears slid down my face, and I stood up to turn toward the counter and grab some tissues. After I had wiped my face and blown my nose, I bagged up the half sandwich, covered the salad bowl with clingy film, and slammed the soup bowl into the microwave, where I could be counted on to forget about it until the next time I opened the thing. Then I made an aimless circuit of the kitchen. The book I had begun writing seemed to have locked me out, which I usually take to mean that it's waiting for some other, younger author to come along and treat it right. It would be at least a day before I could face my desk again, and when I did I would probably have to dream up some other project.

Her Level Gaze had never been right for me, anyway. At heart, it was a tidy little story about a weak man and a woman like a jungle animal, and I had been dressing it up as a kind of postmodern love story. The book really should have been written by Jim Thompson sometime in the mid-fifties.

A grim, heavy tide of grief went through me again, and this time it seemed that I was mourning the death, the real death, of all my childhood and youth. I groaned out loud, baffled by what was happening to me. A treasure house of beauty and vitality, all of this drenched yet hard-edged sense of pleasure, sorrow, and loss, had vanished, been swept away, and I had

barely noticed. My parents, my old neighborhood, my aunts and uncles, a whole era seemed to call out for me, or me for it, and in rapid succession, as if in a series of frames, I saw:

the way a snowfall had looked on a December night in 1960, the big flakes tumbling softly as feathers from a measureless black sky;

a lean hound coursing through the deep snow at the bottom of our sledding hill;

the shredding lacquer on the tops of our sleds, and the chips and dents in the long, cool runners;

a glass of water shining from within on my mother's best white tablecloth.

Circling half blind with tears around the marble counter in my Chicago kitchen, I saw the stunning, inelegant west side of Madison, Wisconsin, the place where I had grown up and which I had escaped pretty much as soon as I could. My amazing girlfriend, now my wife, Lee Truax, had fled with me—we drove across the country to New York, where I went to NYU and she waited tables and tended bar until she could enroll at NYU, too, and cause a great fuss and commotion wherever she went. What was speaking to me, though, was not our college years and the East Village, but Madison's west side, so different then and so much the same, the place where Lee Truax and I had met as children and gone to school with all of our troubled, gorgeous friends.

Then I saw them all, our friends, who had needed to be convinced I was not a jerk because my father was a professor at the University instead of being absent or being nothing, really nothing, like theirs. For a moment their faces shone as clearly as the glass of water that had burned itself into my memory atop my mother's prize white tablecloth . . . their young faces tilted toward the Eel's fine-tuned heart-stopping face. Although they called me Twin, meaning hers, I never really looked like that. And in the next moment, before I could fully take them in, a curtain slammed down like a prohibition. Bang! *No more of that for you, bud.*

“Please,” I said, then “What’s happening to me?” What a baffled moment, filled with what terrible pain—the pain of *what I had not done*, of *what I had lost because I had not done all of that which I had not done*. Whatever it was, I had no idea, I knew only that *I had not done it*.

Then, as if on a giant screen before me, I saw the moving lips, the unshaven face, the torn horrible feet, and I heard the ragged, almost mechanical voice sucking on the four syllables that represented safety to a ragged soul. At that moment, shut out from a realm I long ago had been happy to abandon, I wished I had a totem, to protect me from Madison—the peeling glaze on the Flexible Flyer; the coursing hound; the sound of lockers banging shut in a high-school hallway; the precise way light from the windows in Room 138 fell across the Eel’s face and Dill Olson’s at the beginning of our senior English class, giving them a gorgeous, washed-out glamour.

Looking for release, I switched on the radio, tuned as is generally the case to NPR. A man whose name I had temporarily blanked out even as I recognized his voice said, “The really unexpected thing is how melodious Hawthorne sounds when you read him aloud. We’ve lost that, I think, the idea that the sound of writing is important, too.”

And Nathaniel Hawthorne turned the key; Hawthorne gave me entry to the lost realm. Not the idea of reading him aloud, but that of hearing his words recited: the sound of his writing, as the man on NPR said. I knew exactly how the Hawthorne of *The Scarlet Letter* sounded, because I had once known a boy who had the ability to remember everything he read, and this boy often quoted long passages from the Hawthorne novel. He also liked to throw into ordinary conversation the crazy words he had discovered in a book called *Captain Leland Fountain’s Dictionary of Unknown, Strange, and Preposterous Words*. (He had once told me he found it extremely odd that while nostology was the study of senility, nostomania had nothing at all to do with old age but simply meant a serious case of homesickness.) His name was Howard Bly, but we, our little band, all called him “Hootie.” For some reason, all of us had silly nicknames. The kid couldn’t help memorizing

everything he read. When a string of words entered through his eyes, it printed itself on some endless scroll in his brain. Although I certainly wish I had this capacity, I don't have the faintest idea of how it works, nor did it seem particularly helpful to Hootie Bly, who was not at all literary.

When we were seniors at Madison West and he was seventeen, Hootie looked about thirteen or fourteen, small, blond, pink-cheeked, and cherubic. He had eyes the ceramic, cerulean blue of dolls' eyes, and his hair flopped over his forehead like bangs. Think of Brandon De Wilde in *Shane*, put a few years on him, and that would be Hootie. People tended to love him, if only because he was so beautiful and didn't say a lot. He wasn't smart, like the Eel, my girlfriend, Lee Truax, but neither was he stupid or slow—it was just that Eel was *really* smart. Hootie was not aggressive or forward or pushy in any way. I guess he was born with natural modesty. That doesn't mean he was passive or wishy-washy, because he was not.

This is what Hootie was like: When you look at a group photo, particularly a picture of a bunch of people doing something like hiking across a meadow or hanging out in a bar, you can always spot one person who stands mentally off to one side, enjoying the spectacle before him. Digging things, as Jack Kerouac would say. Sometimes Hootie liked to just lie back and, well, *dig* what was going on around him.

I can say this about Hootie Bly, that he was good through and through. The guy didn't have a mean-spirited or cruel cell, never mind a bone, in his body. Unfortunately, because of his size and the way he looked, people who were not as good-hearted—bullies, jerks—sometimes went after him. They enjoyed picking on him, teasing him in a way that went beyond teasing, sometimes actually shoving him around, and at times we who were his best friends felt we had to step in to protect him.

Hootie could speak up for himself, though. The Eel told me that when a truly ugly and unpleasant fraternity boy insulted him in a grungy State Street coffee shop named the Tick-Tock Diner but called the Aluminum Room, Hootie gave the asshole a murky look and baffled him with a quote

from *The Scarlet Letter*: “Art thou like the Black Man that haunts the forest round about us? Hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?” Less than a minute later, the UW student widened his insult to include Hootie’s parents, who, the kid knew from having seen all of them in the place, owned Badger Foods, the little triangular grocery store two blocks down on State Street. Hootie came back at him with another bit of Hawthorne. “What a strange, sad man is he! In the dark night-time, he calls us to him, and holds thy hand and mine, as when we stood with him on the scaffold yonder!”

The fraternity boy, the same sick, twisted Keith Hayward I had recently been reading about in Detective Cooper’s unhappy memoir, apparently charged toward him, but was held back by his roommate and only friend, Brett Milstrap, who did not want them to be thrown out of the Aluminum Room before the (probable) arrival of this gorgeous blond girl they coveted so greatly that just the sight of her sipping a cup of coffee could keep them warm and happy for three or four days. Meredith Bright was her name, and like Hayward and Milstrap she played a huge role in the story I began trying to figure out over the next weeks and months. She must have been one of the most beautiful young women ever to appear on that campus. The same would have been true if she had gone to UCLA instead of UW. Meredith Bright detested Keith Hayward and thought nothing of Brett Milstrap, but the first time she laid eyes on Hootie Bly and Lee Truax, she was enchanted by them. For a number of reasons.

It would be fair to say that the whole long, crazy story I wound up trying to unearth began when Meredith Bright, seated alone in the Aluminum Room’s last booth, lifted her eyes from her copy of *Love’s Body*, gazed down the length of the counter to spot Hootie and the Eel, and rocked them both by smiling at them. But before I get even farther ahead of myself, I have to go back to where I was and explain a few more things about Hootie and our little group of friends.

I said that hearing one of those comfortable NPR voices talk about

the experience of hearing Hawthorne read aloud was all I needed—all I needed, that is, to understand the intense, unexpected deluge of emotions that had been chasing me around the room since I had looked into the blood-shot eyes of Mr. Obstreperous as two fullbacks from Carbondale toted him by on his way to the exit. I had fought so tenaciously against the sudden sense of recognition that unmediated images and passages from my childhood had streamed back to me in a painful flood. The reason for my doomed tenacity was that Obstreperous reminded me of Hootie, who had spent four decades in a Wisconsin mental hospital, communicating entirely in individual words from Captain Fountain and, maybe when feeling particularly nosotomaniacal, sentences like “Hast thou enticed me into a bond that will prove the ruin of my soul?” *The Scarlet Letter* and the Captain’s obscure gewgaws: that isn’t craziness, it’s fear, the same kind of absolute terror that turned Obstreperous into a muttering statue.

I wanted to know more about that fear. Now that I had opened up this seam, it came to me, I wanted to follow it right to the end. Once I understood the causes of Hootie’s paralysis, I thought, a layer of reality that had been closed to me for nearly forty years would at last become visible.

But it wasn’t all about me, not by a long shot.

Off and on, over the decades since the mid-sixties, this hidden world—the whole question of the wandering guru named Spencer Mallon, what he had accomplished, what he had not, what he still meant to those who had loved and admired him—had troubled me, more than troubled me, aroused an ongoing doubt and misery that stuck to me like a shadow whenever the whole issue swung back into view. Part of this continuous disorder was rooted in the silence of a single human being. She wouldn’t talk to me about it, and neither would the others. They shut me out. I mean, I don’t want to go overboard about something that happened so long ago, but was that really *fair*? Everything was fine, everything was chummy, and just because I didn’t want anything to do with this Mallon faker, they closed ranks against me. Even my girlfriend, who was supposed to look like my twin!

You know what happened? Like a dumb kid, I thought I was, I *told* myself I was, sticking to my principles, when actually the whole business of this amazing man who had been to Tibet and seen someone cut off someone else's hand in a bar, who talked about the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and a philosopher named Norman O. Brown, who was besides that tied in to ancient magic, all this stuff kind of scared me. It sounded like total bullshit, but it also seemed far out of my league—because, who knows, there might have been some reality in it, after all. I think I was afraid that if I met this guy, I might have to believe in him, too.

The Eel knew exactly how I felt, that's how smart she was. She understood that my reaction was a lot more complex than I was willing to accept, and that I was backing away from a fear she found second rate to begin with made her lose a crucial degree of respect for me. Given that I had no interest in pretending to be a college student and had therefore stayed at home the first time my friends all went to the Aluminum Room, I had two chances to make things right: I could have come along to the Italian restaurant where they first heard Mallon's spiel, and I could have made up for my lapses by joining everyone at the second Mallon-séance, in the Henry Street apartment that turned out to be where Keith Hayward and Brett Milstrap lived. Those were my two chances. But after I said no the second time, the door slammed shut, and I was left alone outside, where I had deliberately gone and placed myself.

While they were all trailing after Mallon, I took long walks by myself and wound up, some of the time, shooting lonely hoops at a grade-school playground. Or trying to. I remember missing fifteen free throws in a row, one after the other. On the big day itself, Sunday, the sixteenth of October, 1966, I just stayed in my room and reread Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River*, a novel I loved to distraction because it seemed to describe me, Lee Harwell, exactly, a sensitive, lonely, brilliant young fellow obviously destined for literary success, or if not me *exactly*, at least the person I'd be if I'd gone to Harvard and traveled around Europe, O lost, O soulful, word-crammed wanderer on this earth, a stone a leaf an unfound door.

For two whole days, I had no idea where she was. When I did get some information, it was infuriatingly circumscribed. This was, precisely, all that I was allowed to understand: in one way or another, under circumstances forever closed to me, things had exploded. There had been a gathering, a meeting, perhaps some sort of ceremony, and at this event everything had gone spectacularly to hell. A boy had not only been killed, he had been hideously mutilated, ripped to shreds. One of the inevitable rumors about this cataclysm had been that the dead boy seemed to have been torn apart by enormous teeth. During the months that followed, over in fact the next four decades, the one person I still knew from those days who had been part of Mallon's ill-fated entourage, my wife, had refused even to try to explain what had happened to them all.

For a week or so, she just clammed up. The only details she was willing to share with me had to do with the conduct of the police during the subsequent investigations, the confusion and rage of her useless father, her impatience with our teachers and fellow students, her despair about poor Hootie. After things had calmed down a bit and the mystery of Hootie's location had finally been clarified, Eel tried on at least two occasions to visit him at the Lamont Hospital, where it turned out he had been all along. The first time she spoke to someone there, whoever it was (apparently, descending to such details was a waste of time) forbade her to come out: Mr. Bly's condition was too grave, too precarious. A month later, she tried again. This time, the gatekeeper invited her to visit the hospital, and it was Hootie Bly who turned her down. Using words borrowed from Hawthorne, he refused even to see her. Ever. His refusal stayed firm throughout our senior year, and I guess finally Lee gave up. After we took off for New York, she never mentioned him again.

From time to time I thought of that smiling, blue-eyed kid and wondered what had become of him. He was still important to me, and I knew that he must still have meant a great deal to my wife, who eventually ceased to be the Eel and became widely known, in certain circles, under the name

she was born with. I wished him well. After six months, I thought, eight months, he must have left the hospital and picked up his life again. He probably moved back in with his parents. On their retirement, he would take over Badger Foods, maybe liven it up a little. Or get out of Madison, marry a girl who looked a lot like him, work in an office, and raise two or three blond, cherubic children. People like Hootie Bly were *supposed* to have uneventful, essentially unexamined, but deeply appreciated, truly lived-in lives. If the world didn't turn out well for them, the rest of us didn't have a chance.

Hootie's true fate remained a mystery to me until the summer of 2000, when on a rare vacation together my wife and I went to Bermuda. I tend not to take vacations, and my wife prefers to visit places that she already knows, where she has both friends and something to do. She spends a lot of time at conferences and board meetings, and she has a busy, useful, completely admirable life. Marriage to a novelist can be as lonely as being one yourself, without even the companionship of imaginary people. I am happy that Lee has created such a fulfilling life for herself, and I enjoy those few times when we go somewhere together for no reason other than to relax and walk around. (Of course I always bring my work, and Lee travels with her own gadgets.) So we were having a nice lunch at a place in Hamilton called Tom Moore's Tavern, and across the room I saw a man of about my age with blond hair going gray, a good tanned face full of character, seated at a table with a very appealing woman who looked a good deal like him. If my wife were not present, despite her age the blond lady would have easily been the best-looking woman in the room. The former Eel remains completely unaware of this, and she gets irritated if someone points it out, but no matter where she happens to be, Lee Truax is always the most beautiful woman in the room. I mean that. Always.

The well-off, affable man across the room could have been the grown-up, prosperous Howard Bly, if Hootie had made all the right choices and enjoyed a fair bit of good luck. "Honey," I said, "Hootie Bly could be sitting across the room from us, and he looks great."

"It's not Hootie," she said. "Sorry. I wish it were, though."

"How can you be so sure?" I asked.

"Because Hootie's still in that hospital. The only thing that's different about him is that he got older, just like us."

"He's still there?" I asked, aghast. "In the Lamont?"

"That's where he is, the poor guy."

"How do you know?"

I watched her measuring her fish with her fork, then severing a morsel she moved carefully onto its tines. Other people seldom notice this, but my wife eats in a very particular way. I always enjoy watching her go through the necessary rituals.

"I have my ways," she told me. "From time to time, people communicate with me."

"That's all you're going to tell me, isn't it?"

"This conversation is about Hootie, not who told me about him."

And that was that. Her refusal to speak returned us to the familiar ancient silence, where I had no right to ask for information because I had chosen first not to prowl around the university campus, then, more condemningly, not even to meet, much less adore, Spencer Mallon. My friends, even the Eel, they all but worshipped this guy. I should say, especially the Eel. Who do you think she thought she was protecting by refusing to name her source?

That's enough of Mallon, at least for a while.



Of the five people in our little band from Madison West, three had serious problems with their fathers. At the time, I thought this explained a lot about their attraction to Mallon, and I still do. Going by what my friends told me, Spencer Mallon might have been designed by committee to be hypnotically appealing to a bunch of adventurous seventeen- and eighteen-year-old kids who had, one way or another, been wounded by their bad-news dads.

He certainly spoke straight to my friends, he roped them right in. He *seduced* them—that’s what it comes down to. And because they had been hypnotized and seduced, they followed this character out into an obscure meadow owned by the university’s agronomy department and cheerfully went along with whatever it was that proved to be so ruinous to them, every one.

The Eel’s dad was no prize to begin with, but after crib death took her little brother in his sixth or seventh month, I don’t remember, he fell apart, spectacularly. Carl Truax had earned a few patents that proved he had been an inventor once, and most days he dragged himself out of his foul-smelling bed to put in a few hours in the backyard shed he called his “workshop.” By the time his daughter was in her senior year, he had stopped pretending to do anything out there but drink. When the day’s first bottle became no more than a fond memory, he took off on his round of crummy taverns and bars, scrounging for a couple of dollars he could spend on more alcohol. How guys like that manage to get money is utterly mysterious to me, but good old Carl almost always managed to raise enough to see him through his day’s drinking and still have a few bucks left over. Sometimes he brought home a present to appease the only other person who lived in his hovel, his amazing daughter, the person who, when he was home to eat dinner, cooked it for him and did her best to keep the hovel clean and sanitary. Her attitude toward her father generally vacillated between a dry rage and a furious contempt.

Just before Dilly Olson came up with the brilliant idea of hanging out in places like the Tick-Tock to pose as UW students and get invited to fraternity parties, the ploy that led them straight to Keith Hayward, Meredith Bright, and Mallon, Carl rolled in with a poster he had won in a poker game at the scuzziest dive in all of Madison. It was of a famous Cassius Marcellus Coolidge painting called *A Friend in Need*, depicting half a dozen dogs dressed like humans playing poker. He was sure she’d love it. A cigar-smoking bulldog was using a rear paw to pass the ace of spades under the table to a yellow mongrel, wasn’t that the cutest damn thing you ever saw?

The Eel detested this sentimental piece of shit, but three of the boys, who were reminded of themselves, fell in love with *A Friend in Need* and talked about it nonstop for days. They had the run of the hovel and therefore constant access to the masterpiece because about a week after the death of her infant son, Carl's wife and Eel's mother, Lurleen Henderson Truax, took off without softening the shock of her absence with advance warning or a farewell note. Four days after the baby's burial, when her husband was on his rounds and her nine-year-old daughter at school, the Eel's mom crammed some stuff into a cheap suitcase from St. Vincent de Paul, ducked out of the hovel, and disappeared. Lurleen had her own problems, plenty of them, and the Eel missed her in the complicated way you'd miss a hive of bees that produced great honey but seemed intent on stinging you to death one day.

After her mother's vanishing act, the Eel, Lee Truax, raised herself. She made herself do her homework, she shopped and made meals, she helped herself with her homework and put herself to bed at night, and she figured out that whatever you did had long-term consequences. She learned that people tell you all about themselves by the way they act and the things they say. All you had to do was pay attention. People opened themselves up, put everything on display, and never knew they were doing it.

Although not gay, the Eel decided early on that because boys always ran things and gave the orders she would prefer to look like a boy rather than a girl, so she took out the good scissors and gave herself a Mo Howard bowl cut, and started going around in blue jeans and plaid shirts. Dressed like that, under her weird haircut, she looked like the Platonic ideal of a tomboy. As long as you took the time to look at her with the same concentration she gave you, all of this somehow made her incredibly cute. If you just casually, lazily took her in and let your eyes roam elsewhere, you would probably think she was on the plain side. You might even take her for a boy.

Hootie loved her, God knows I loved her, and if the other two guys in our group did not bring exactly the same kind of emotion to their relationships with her, they felt close to her in a comfortable, uncomplicated way—

almost as if she really were another boy their age, albeit one they wished to protect. They did their best to protect Hootie, too, so it wasn't because she was female. Half the time, I think they almost forgot that she wasn't just another boy. I had been tremendously fond of these guys, and I trusted them absolutely. They were the people with whom I spent most of the day and hung out with at night, the people I talked to on the phone after school. Once Boats Boatman and Dilly Olson understood that I was not a snob, despite the disadvantage of actually living in a house that was pretty ritzy by their standards, plus having an intact set of parents, they relaxed around me and started treating me the same way they treated themselves, with a rough, affectionate good humor. Like Hootie, like my wife in her particular way, these two young men had been ruined, I thought, by whatever Spencer Mallon had caused to happen out in that damned meadow.

Going back a step, I could also say that their wretched fathers had trashed their lives by scarpering off, which made them vulnerable to peripatetic wisdom merchants like Mallon. Nobody ever says this, but in the sixties these frauds were all over the place, especially in towns with college campuses. Sometimes they were homegrown, academics who jumped off the rails and used their classrooms as pulpits, but just as often they wandered in from nowhere, preceded by a little bubble of promissory excitement built up by acolytes who had been converted during the guru/philosopher/sage's last visit. Generally, they stuck around for a month or so, sleeping on their admirers' couches or spare beds, "borrowing" their hosts' clothing, accepting free meals and free drink, sleeping with the hosts' girlfriends and other female admirers. Everybody owned everything, according to them, so naturally they had a right to all of their followers' possessions. Ownership was a morally suspect concept. Spencer Mallon told the Mallon-ites that "everything is everything," which extended the usual nonpossessive mind-set into the cosmos. Even when I was seventeen I thought all this was claptrap, a variety of nonsense particularly friendly to predators. But I was raised in a reasonable home by reasonable people.

Jason Boatman, whom we called “Boats” for two obvious reasons, was being raised almost entirely by his mother, Shirley. We all liked Shirley Boatman, and she liked us back, especially the Eel, but it was no secret that the slight drinking problem she had before her husband deserted her had blossomed into something much more serious after that. Shirley was a long way from Carl Truax’s passionate surrender to alcohol, but she drank a beer with breakfast and nipped at the gin bottle all afternoon. By nine o’clock at night, she was so deeply in the bag that she usually passed out in her chair.

Seven years before Spencer Mallon’s arrival in Madison, Boats’s father, who had been running a struggling boatbuilding enterprise in Milwaukee and commuting back and forth three or four times a week, announced that he had fallen in love with a twenty-year-old apprentice boat-builder named Brandi Brubaker. She had come to him from the UW boat-house, like a lot of his underpaid assistants and apprentices. He and Brandi would be renting a place near the boatyard on Lake Michigan, and in the future his visits to Madison would be to continue his work for the rowing team and to see his son.

The visits to his son soon petered out to once a month, then stopped altogether. His business picked up, and probably he had less time to give to his old family. Cunning little Brandi had soon produced a pair of twins, Candee and Andee. They were “adorable.” Boats lost whatever interest he had once had in boats and boat-building, and would happily have traded his father for any of the others’, even Dilly Olson’s, who had run off ten years earlier, never to be heard from again.

At seventeen and eighteen, Jason Boatman was a pretty good-looking kid until you put him alongside Dilly, who made him look furtive and shifty. That he actually was kind of furtive and shifty did not trouble those of us who had been his friends since grade school. Before his father abandoned him, Boats had been fairly outgoing, cheerful, and easy to read. He was skinny and on the tall side, the kind of nice, friendly kid who goes along with what everybody else wants to do. After his father left, he buried his

sense of humor and became morose. He didn't talk as much, and his shoulders slumped. He walked around with his hands in his pockets, staring at the ground, as if looking for something he had lost. Boats completely gave up on school. In class, he sat nearly sideways at his desk and gave the blackboard the suspicious look you'd have for someone you suspected was lying to you. His dominant mode was mild grievance. If you went to his house, instead of hello he'd say something like "About time you showed up." He stopped reading books and participating in sports. His conversation became taciturn, almost reluctant, except for when he complained. Complaint brought out a recognizable version of the Boats we remembered from grade school, observant, voluble, wholly present. These arias centered on our teachers, the books they assumed we would read and the homework they assumed we would tackle each night, the weather, the brutality of athletes, the sloppiness of the school janitor, his mother's blurriness as the evening wore on. Boats and the Eel could swap drunken parent stories like a saxophone player and a drummer trading fours. But no matter how far-ranging his laments over the state of the world, Boats never spoke of his father. Every now and then, apropos of nothing, he shook his head and muttered, "Brandi Brubaker," coughing up the name of his father's new wife like a hairball.

The other great change that befell Jason "Boats" Boatman after his father split involved a ferocious concentration on shoplifting. He started thieving on a heroic scale. It was like a binge, only it never stopped. What do you call that, a spree? Boats went on a lifelong thieving spree. Back in the fifth grade, all of my friends now and then swiped things like candy bars, comic books and paperbacks, and school supplies from the neighborhood shops, but there was no consistency or pattern to it. None of us did it all the time, and I did it less than most. Sometimes, Eel or Dilly Olson couldn't afford to get the new notebook or ballpoint pen some teacher wanted to see on our desks, and the only way to get the required object was to go around to the stationery store and swipe it. Boats acted exactly the same way up until about a month or so after his father took off. Then wherever he went, he dipped into

stores and ransacked whatever he could, he stole everything he could carry out on his person. He gave us so many sweaters and sweatshirts that some of our parents got suspicious. (Not the Eel's father, of course.) Shirley Boatman could see what was going on, and she warned Boats that one day he'd get pinched and have to go to court. The warning had no effect.

Eel told me, and it made a lot of sense even then, that he used all these shoes, socks, underpants, UW T-shirts, erasers, notebooks, pencils, staplers, and books to feed a howling emptiness within him. When Mallon came along and scooped them all up, he now and again deputized Boats to nab various items for him. According to Mallon's theories, Boats wasn't stealing anything, he was just redistributing it. Because everything was everything, nobody, especially shop owners, owned any of the property they imagined theirs. It always struck Eel and me as funny that if Boats actually believed in Mallon's theories, he would stop stealing on the spot. As far as he was concerned, the whole point of theft was that whatever you slipped under your coat really belonged to someone else—that's why putting it under your coat made you feel better. The sense of a fleeting superiority helped feed the emptiness within. But of course everything that entered that cruel space was instantly consumed.

I have mentioned that going over to State Street to hang out in the Aluminum Room and pretend to be UW students was Dill Olson's idea, and this was typical of Donald Olson's role in our little band. Don Olson would have been a leader wherever he went to school: he was one of those kids who possess a natural, built-in authority that seems rooted in a deep personal decency. The way he looked undoubtedly added to this already considerable personal authority. During grade school, he was always taller than the rest of us, and by his senior year in high school he had topped out at six-two. His height would have been insignificant had it not been in a sense magnified or spotlighted by the effect of his deep dark eyes, crisp dark eyebrows, high-cut cheekbones, mobile and expressive mouth, smooth unblemished olive complexion, rather longish dark hair that fell nearly to his

collar, and effortlessly immaculate posture. He always stood as straight as a marine, but gracefully, as if nothing could be more natural than perfect posture.

If Dilly Olson had used his handsomeness for gain, if he had demonstrated an awareness of its effect and pleasure in that awareness, if he had betrayed any trace of self-love, he would have been ruined—in a different way, I mean, than he was, in effect, ruined by the course of his life. Instead, he seemed to have no idea that he was incredibly handsome, or to feel that his obvious good looks were irrelevant to the real business of his life. What that real business might be was still an unknown quantity. If we had lived in New York City or Los Angeles, someone would almost certainly have come along to suggest that Dill Olson become an actor, but we lived in Wisconsin, and no one we knew had ever become an actor or, for that matter, any other sort of artist. We saw a lot of movies, but the people who acted in them were clearly the products of some other, more elevated realm. They were remote from us, those actors. Even the air they breathed was another substance than the workaday stuff we inhaled.

Unlike me, Dill did not read books as if they, too, were meant to be inhaled and thereafter to inform your thoughts and actions. He never got lost in a book, he was not academic or scholarly in any sense, and it seemed that he could never follow the path that Lee Truax and I had set upon, that of going to college and feeling our way into our futures through the usual means of exploring a curriculum. He could not afford college anyhow. His mother and her stuffy and alcoholic new boyfriend, a credit union officer whose dearest wish was that Donald Olson leave home for good, had let him know they would not pay for college tuition.

That Dill would get some ordinary office job or become a clerk in a shop seemed impossible, unjust, and the draft board, otherwise eager to devour young men just like him, had already declined his services because of a faulty valve in his heart: in a moment of boredom and despair, he had tried to enlist, naturally without telling anyone, and been declared 1-Y, medically

unfit until such time as grade-school students were issued guns and helmets, which surprised the army recruiters as much as it disappointed him, briefly. As time went on and the demonstrations grew louder and more frequent, Dill learned enough about what was going on in Vietnam simultaneously to be distressed by the war and grateful for his draft status.

Actually, the conflict in Vietnam gave him a cause that helped take his mind off the depressing subject of what he would do after he graduated. Madison West forbade any form of outright political expression as a matter of policy, and our principal, a World War II veteran, would probably have done his best to expel any student bold enough to organize or participate in an antiwar gathering on school property. We didn't need our own, though, because we could fall into the speak-ins, teach-ins, marches, and crowd scenes that were always taking place on and immediately around the university's campus. By 1966, Madison was well on its way to the aggrieved, rolling boil of 1968, and all the protests and marches gave Dilly lots of opportunities to meet college girls at the same time that he genuinely protested against the war.

And Boats cared about the war, too, because he feared being snatched up by the army the day he graduated from high school, but he was far more interested in college girls and fraternity parties.

Unless I'm wrong about this, part of Mallon's appeal to Dilly Olson lay in his attitude toward Vietnam. Mallon made it clear that he thought the war was necessary at that specific time—he seemed to have a semi-religious feeling about violence, which he saw as a kind of birth—although he implied that his final goal, attainable through a certain occult ceremony, involved using a sacred violence as a means of so transforming our earth that the war in Vietnam would end of itself, like a weed deprived too long of water. The fire would devour the fire, the hurricane devastate the rampaging typhoon. It was something like that, anyhow. After all this destruction would come a rebirth, the dimensions and nature of which were to be explored joyfully by Mallon and his chosen few. I have to give that fraud this

much, that he told Dilly, Boats, my wife, and his other three followers, Meredith Bright, Keith Hayward, and Brett Milstrap, that the great transformation and rebirth might last only a second or two, also that it might take place only in their minds, as the opening of a fresh vision, a truer, more essential way of seeing things. Despite the damage he caused to every one of these kids, I have to respect his honesty on this point. Like every other phony sage and prophet wandering through campuses in the mid- to late sixties, Spencer Mallon promised an end to time and a new apocalypse; unlike most of the others, he admitted that the end of time might last only a moment, or take place only in the throwing open of a mental window. I hate the man, I think he was a phony who got lucky in the worst possible way, but I have to respect this evidence of what feels to me like wisdom. If not wisdom, a conscience.



My girlfriend—Lee Truax, the Eel—and her companions went to the Tick-Tock Diner, called the Aluminum Room for the odd, reflective, tinfoil-like material covering its walls, and in that unlikely little dump a stunning blond girl named Meredith Bright welcomed the Eel and Hootie into the end booth where she sat alone with a copy of a book called *Love's Body* by Norman O. Brown (one of Spencer Mallon's guides and teachers, in this case literally). Down at the front of the diner, terrible Keith Hayward and his roommate, Milstrap, regarded the scene in jealousy and disgust. (It should be noted that even at this first meeting, both my wife and Hootie found Keith Hayward oddly unsettling.) True to her time if not her type, Meredith had some expertise in concocting horoscopes, and it turned out that she had wheedled Mallon, her guru and lover, into letting her draw up a horoscope, or maybe a series of horoscopes, I'm not sure how this works, to determine the astrological signs most desirable in his followers. According to her calculations, the group required a Taurus and a Pisces, exactly what Eel and Hootie were, to accomplish its ends. Less urgently, they also needed a

Scorpio and a Cancer, Dilly's and Boats's signs. So they were doomed from the start, all of them. It was in their stars.

I'm sure this was genuine: I don't believe Meredith cooked up a phony chart after encountering my friends in the Aluminum Room. Although to me such recognitions cannot but sound delusional, I believe that Meredith Bright understood that Eel and Hootie satisfied her crucial astrological requirements the minute she spotted them staring up at her from the bottom end of the counter. I think of how innocent they must have looked, how tremendously innocent they actually were, and how appealingly innocent they must have seemed to Mallon, who devoured innocence wholesale. Having guessed what she needed only to confirm, Meredith summoned Eel and Hootie before her with a beckoning look, and after asking for their names, she did the same for their astrological signs. Bingo! On the money! And what luck, a Taurus and a Cancer were sitting right down at the end of the counter, what do you know, they must all come to an eight o'clock gathering, two nights hence, in the lower room at La Bella Capri. Please. Pretty please, with sugar on the top. Meredith Bright actually said that.

Because they could not have resisted any such invitation from the world's most desirable woman, they immediately agreed to show up in the downstairs dining room of the State Street Italian restaurant they had known all their lives. The Eel asked me to come along, Dilly tried to cajole me into joining them, but I had not gazed into the bottomless, speaking eyes of Meredith Bright, and I said no. It was not even as though they were still pretending to be UW students, because Meredith Bright had understood from the first that they were in high school. My friends and my lover, for Lee Truax and I had been sleeping together since our fifth date, tried but failed to sell me on the mystery and glamour of Spencer Mallon (as described by Miss Bright).

And the next time we were alone, Eel asked me, "You really don't want to go? It'll be so cool, it'll be so interesting! This Mallon guy won't be like anyone you've ever seen before. Come on, sweetie, don't you want to meet a

real, I don't know, magician? A traveling wise man who has something to teach us?"

"The whole idea of a traveling wise man makes me sick," I said. "I'm sorry, it just does. So no, I'm not going to sit downstairs at La Bella Capri and listen to this guy's b.s."

"How do you know it'll be b.s.?"

"I know it'll be bullshit because it can't be anything else."

"Well, Lee . . ."

This was really poignant. Her inability to speak, her lingering silence, expressed a kind of hopelessness no one wants to see in his girlfriend, his close companion, his beloved and intimate friend. She was telling me that not only had I missed the point, it seemed likely that I would never understand. Then she asked:

"Do you mind if I go?"

At that second, I could have rewritten her future. Right there. Mine, too. But it wasn't in me. She so much wanted to waste her time sitting at the feet of this peripatetic con man that I could not object. It should have been harmless; the only consequence should have been the memory of a tedious and confusing hour or two. I said:

"No, I don't mind, you should do what you want."

"Yes," she said, "I should."

She went, and they went, and arrived early, and took a side table and ordered a pizza and gobbled away while the real university students arrived, among them Brett Milstrap and the disconcerting Keith Hayward, who sneered at them as he and his roommate commandeered a table near the front. Soon, the clubby downstairs room had filled up with students attracted by whatever they had heard about the evening's star attraction. At ten after eight, a ruffle of conversation and laughter from the top of the staircase drew the attention of all, who swiveled their heads toward the arched, cavelike stucco entrance at the foot of the stairs to observe the grand entrance of Meredith Bright, a lush, darkly beautiful young woman later introduced as

Alexandra, and Spencer Mallon, who, accompanied by his stunning acolytes, entered the downstairs room in a flurry of beautiful faces, rough blond hair, a safari jacket, and weathered brown boots, “like,” Hootie Bly told me later, “a god.”

I formed a clear mental picture of this being only fifteen years later, in 1981, when having gone alone to the first showing that day of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, I saw Indiana Jones, in the person of Harrison Ford, striding through clouds of dust and sand. A safari jacket, a dashing hat, a weathered face neither young nor old. Out loud, I said, “Good Lord, that’s Spencer Mallon,” but no one heard me, I hope. The theater was two-thirds empty, and I was at the end of the row third from the back, surrounded by vacant seats. Much later, in a rare moment Lee described Mallon’s face as “vulpine,” so I altered the Indiana Jones model a bit, but not by much.

Within seconds of his appearance in the entry at the foot of the stairs, Mallon separated himself from the adoring women and led them to the foremost table, whirled a chair back to front, parked himself on it astraddle, and began to talk, ravishingly. “For anyone else,” an awed Hootie told me, “the way he talks would be like singing.” It wasn’t that the guru chanted, rather that his voice was surpassingly musical, capable of tremendous range, and distinguished by the beauty of his timbre, I guess you’d call it. He had to have had something, God knows, and an extraordinarily beautiful voice can be very persuasive.

Mallon described wandering through Tibet; he talked about *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, in the mid- to late sixties virtually the Bible for phonies. In Tibetan bars, the Eel and Hootie told me, Spencer Mallon had twice—two times!—seen one man sever the hand of another, seen the blood rush down the length of the bar, and seen the man with the hatchet snatch up the severed hand and throw it to a waiting dog. It had been a sign, a signal, and he had come to explain its meaning.

After they finally opened up a little, both Hootie and my girlfriend reported that despite the severed hands and streams of blood it had been like

listening to music, except music that had meaning flowing through it. “He made you see things,” both of them said, although when not in the guru’s presence they found it difficult to describe his message. “I can’t repeat any of that stuff,” Hootie told me; the Eel said, “Sorry, but if you weren’t there, there’s no way I can make you understand what he said to us.”

Then she added, “Because he said it to *us*, get it?”

She was deliberately excluding me, depositing me on the far side of a line she had drawn in the sand. They had been singled out, my four friends, they had been elevated to a height so great I was scarcely visible anymore. Mallon had signaled them to remain after the UW students left, and when they and the two girlfriends, as spectacular as magicians’ assistants, remained alone in the lower room, for once without Hayward and Milstrap, the sage told them they would help him at last achieve something, a breakthrough, I’m not sure what he said about it, but it was going to be a breakthrough anyhow, the culmination of all his work to date. He thought, he hoped so. The vessels had shattered, he said, and divine sparks flew through the fallen world. The divine sparks yearned to be reunited: and when they were reunited, the fallen world would be transformed into a glorious tapestry. Perhaps they would be privileged to witness the transformation, in whatever sense, whatever manifestation, and for however long. The little band from Madison West felt essential to him, he *needed* them . . . It was like that, a sense of immanence, urgency, promise.

“Trust me,” he said, perhaps to all of them, but specifically to Dill. “When the tide rises, you shall be by my side.”

Olson told this to me in a private moment, and I did not think he was boasting: for once, Dilly seemed to be at peace with himself. I suppose that was when I started to get scared. Or maybe I mean alarmed. What did this mysterious guy mean, anyhow, by “When the tide rises”? What tide, and how would it “rise”?

Before they separated, he told my friends to meet him two nights later, and gave them the address of the Gorham Street apartment of Hayward and

Milstrap. During the next two school days, my friends were quivering with excitement, and after I had twice refused my girlfriend's invitation to join them in diving down the rabbit hole, I was excluded from their accumulating expectancy. They had joined shoulders against me. I'd missed my last chance. But of course I did not at all want to pursue them into the rabbit hole. What I did want to do was to persuade Eel, at least, that she and they were being exploited by a handsome fraud who may have said he was interested in causing great transformations through occult means but was undoubtedly after earthier goals.

In fact, even before the Gorham Street gathering, the guru's reputation had begun to shred. The beauty named Alexandra, one of Mallon's companions on his first outing, came up to Hootie in the Tick-Tock (where they now went every afternoon, straight from school) and tried to warn him from associating with the man. Too bad—by then Hootie loved his hero, and Alexandra's tales of his amorality and double-dealing hurt him, on Mallon's behalf. Hootie thought she must have been inventing most of her story; that somehow Spencer had brought this huge-eyed, wild-haired, gypsylike dame to hysterical tears impressed the dickens out of Hootie. And that Mallon should have been kicked out of a fraternity house or two sounded like either an exaggeration or an actual lie—someone was lying anyhow, he thought, probably the fraternity boys because they were angry that Mallon had moved on. When the ranting woman warned Hootie that Mallon would probably try to move in with one of his groups, he flushed with excitement and hoped it would be him! And in fact, not long after the Gorham Street meeting, Spencer Mallon did wind up spending a couple of nights in the basement of Badger Foods, the Blys' little corner grocery store.

Not that I was aware of Mallon's location, because I was not. The Eel, with whom I had spent nearly every school and weekend night for a year and a half, continued to sit next to me in class, but otherwise acted as though she had embarked on some luxury cruise that I had declined, inexplicably, to share with her. At night, she barely gave me five minutes on the telephone.

I had missed, all but literally, the boat, and the Eel was so entranced with the details of her voyage she had little time left over for me.

All I knew of the Gorham Street séance was that my girlfriend had wound up being seated at a long table beside Keith Hayward while Mallon held forth. “He was great, but you wouldn’t understand, so I’m not even going to try,” she told me. “But boy, I’m never getting that close to Keith Hayward again. You know, that guy I was telling you about, with the thin face and the wrinkled-up forehead? And acne scars? He’s seriously bad news.”

Had he tried to pick her up? At least for those with eyes, the Eel was so cute that I could hardly have blamed him.

My question angered her. “No, you idiot. It’s not what he did, it’s what he *is*. That guy’s scary. I mean, *really* scary. He got mad at something—well, Spencer called him out for staring at his girlfriend, that Meredith, who doesn’t deserve him, by the way—and he didn’t like being called on it, not at *all*, and I don’t know, I guess I grinned at him for getting pissed off, and then he was pissed off at *me*, and I looked at him, and the guy’s eyes looked like black holes. I’m not kidding. Black puddles, with horrible, horrible things swimming around way way down. Something’s wrong with Hayward. And Spencer knows it, too, but he doesn’t see how sick that asshole really is.”

I thought that she was probably right about this, at least in a way. The Eel had clearer, quicker insights into people than I did, and undoubtedly she still does. In Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, she once performed a delicate service for her favorite organization, the American Confederation of the Blind, that completely stunned me when she later described it. What she did there amounted to psychic detection, and it was absolutely successful. In any case, I learned from Detective Cooper’s memoir how rightly Lee had read Keith Hayward, and now it terrifies me that she should have spent five minutes in his company. At the time, he didn’t sound too dangerous, just off balance, desperately unhappy, probably introverted and bitter about it. A lot of people are like that, and many of them would have struck the seventeen-

year-old Eel Truax as disturbed; Keith Hayward, on the other hand, was as sick as she described him to me, Mallon, and everyone else in their group. Only Hootie really took her at her word, and of course no one paid any attention to what Hootie thought.



At the Gorham Street gathering, Spencer Mallon told his followers two stories, and I will set them down here as they were told to me.

Story #1

A few weeks into a new academic year, Mallon was spending a couple of weeks moving between fraternity houses and student flophouses near the University in Austin, Texas. Although nothing of an unusual or illuminating nature had as yet taken place, he'd been sensing the immanence of some extraordinary event. (And in fact, something quite extraordinary did happen, though it did not play a part in the story he wanted to tell.) On the morning in question, he walked out onto the hot, stony sidewalks on East 15th Street and strayed toward his favorite coffee shop, the Frontier Diner. Soon he became aware that a man in a suit and a necktie was tagging after him on the other side of the street. For some reason, perhaps the formality of his wardrobe, the man made him feel unsettled, almost threatened. He could not deny that part of his unease was the completely irrational feeling that despite appearances this man was not in fact a human being. Mallon ducked into a side street and moved quickly to the next intersection, where he found the man waiting for him, still on the other side of the street.

Mallon thought he had no choice: he marched across the street to confront his pursuer. The man in the gray suit retreated, frowning. By the time Mallon had crossed the street, the man had somehow managed to disappear. Mallon had not seen him dip into a shop or behind a parked car, he had not seen him do anything at all. One second, the man who only appeared to be

human (he thought) had been walking backward with a look of displeasure on his face; the next, he had been absorbed into the pale brick of the building behind him.

If only for a second, had Mallon glanced away?

Around he turned, and on toward the coffee shop he continued. After he had rounded the corner and returned to 15th Street, he sensed a commotion taking place behind him, and, nerves prickling, looked over his shoulder. Half a block away, the not-quite-human figure in the gray suit came to an abrupt halt and stared straight ahead.

“Why are you following me?” Mallon asked.

The being in the suit pushed his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “Has it occurred to you to wonder what else might be following you?” But for its oddly mechanical quality, his voice sounded almost perfectly human.

“Do you have any idea what a useless question that is?”

“Take care, sir,” the figure said. “I mean that sincerely.”

Mallon whirled around and strode, though he did not jog, to the diner. All the while, he had the feeling that the man was behind him, although whenever he looked back, his pursuer was nowhere to be seen.

Inside the diner, he moved straight down the length of the counter past the booths, ignoring the empty seats. Marge, the waitress, asked him what was up.

“I’m trying to shake somebody,” he told her. “Can I go through the kitchen?”

“Spencer,” she said, “you can walk through my kitchen anytime.”

Mallon came out into a wide alleyway where a cluster of garbage cans stood against the wall to his right. One of them, silvery where the others were dark, looked as though it had been purchased that morning. An unlined yellow index card bearing a few written words had been taped to its shiny lid.

He knew that the card had been left for him. Although a toxic fog seemed to hover about it, he could not force himself to walk away without

reading the words. He peeled the card away from the gleaming lid and raised it to his eyes. In blue-black ink that still looked wet, the words on the card read, QUIT WHILE YOU'RE BEHIND, SPENCER. OUR DOGS HAVE LONG TEETH.

Story #2

A year later, Mallon had wandered to New York, a city he seldom visited, and soon he found himself with little money and less to do. The Columbia University students whose promise had seemed so great when he began working with them had proved to be incurious dilettantes. A helpful admirer had provided him with a forged student card, and while the last of his money ran out, he spent his days in the library roaming through the literature of the arcane and occult. When in his research he came across a particularly helpful volume, he looked to see if it had been consulted in the past decade; if it had not, he withdrew it from the library, informally.

Prowling through the stacks one day, he seemed to catch an odd light filtering into the long shelves of books. The light appeared to come from somewhere near the library's central core. At first he paid it no attention, since it was faint and intermittent, no more than an occasional half-seen rosy pulse. An odd spectacle for a library, perhaps, but odd things often happened at Columbia University.

When the pulse became brighter and more distracting, Mallon began to move through the stacks, looking for its source. It is important to note here that none of the graduate students roaming the stacks observed the pulsing, orange-pink glow. The glow led him across the stacks in the direction of the elevators, growing more vibrant as he went, and finally brought him to the closed metal door of a carrel. There could be no doubt that the carrel was the source of the glowing color, for it streamed out over the top, around the sides, and beneath the bottom of the metal door. For once in his

life, Mallon was uncertain of his mission. It seemed to him that he had drawn near to the defining mystery of his life—the great transformation that alone could give to his existence the meaning he knew it must possess—and the sheer importance of what he had come upon paralyzed him.

Two students coming down the narrow passage outside the carrel looked at him oddly and asked if anything was wrong.

“You maybe see a trace of color in the air around that door?” he asked them, referring to the pulsing, wavering waterfall of radiant orange-pink light that streamed toward them.

“Color?” asked one of the students. Both of them turned to look at the door to the carrel.

“Something bright,” Mallon said, and the waterfall of radiant light seemed to double in intensity.

“You need to get some sleep, bro,” the young man said, and the two of them left.

When they were out of sight, Mallon summoned his courage and gave the door a feeble rap. No response came. He rapped again, more forcefully. This time, an irritated voice called, “What is it?”

“I have to talk to you,” Mallon said.

“Who is that?”

“You don’t know me,” Mallon said. “But unlike everyone else in this building, I can see light pouring out of your carrel.”

“You see light coming from my carrel?”

“Yes.”

“Are you a student here?”

“No.”

Pause.

“Are you on the faculty, God help us?”

“No, I’m not.”

“How did you get in this library? Are you on the staff?”

“Someone gave me a fake student card.”

He heard the man in the carrel scrape his chair back from the desk. Footsteps approached the door.

“Okay, what color is the light you see?”

“Kind of like the color of cranberry juice mixed with orange juice,” Mallon said.

“I guess you better get in here,” the man said.

Mallon heard the clicking of the lock, and the door swung open.

That's it? The story ended when the guy opened the door?

You'll see. Everything stops when you open the door.

About a week later, on Saturday, October 15, 1966, the eight of them—Mallon, the Eel, Hootie, Boats, Dill Olson, Meredith Bright, Hayward, and Milstrap—went out to the agronomy meadow at the end of Glasshouse Road, climbed over the concrete barrier, and went through a rehearsal that seemed to satisfy Mallon. That night, they all trooped off to a party at the Beta Delt house, home to the fraternity Hayward and Milstrap belonged to. I wasn't invited and heard about it only later. That night, I finally got through to the Eel around midnight, and she had reached a stage of drunkenness well past incoherence. The next day she was too hungover to talk to me, and that evening, she and all the rest of that doomed bunch followed Spencer Mallon back to the agronomy meadow.

Then there was only silence; there came rumors of a “black Mass,” of a “pagan ritual,” nonsense like that, given heat by the disappearance of one young man and the discovery of another's hideously mutilated corpse. Brett Milstrap had vanished from the earth, it seemed, and the cruelly mangled corpse had been Keith Hayward's. For a while, policemen stalked through our houses, through our school, everywhere we went, asking the same questions over and over. In their wake came reporters, photographers, and men with dark suits and tennis ball haircuts who hung around the edges of the ac-

tion, watching and taking notes, whose presence was never explained. Lee stayed at Jason's house for a week or two, refusing to speak to anyone but Hootie and Boats and those who could force her to talk to them. Mallon had fled, all three parties agreed on that point, and Dill Olson had followed in his wake; Meredith Bright had taken off at a dead run, packed up her clothes, and camped out at the airport until she could get a flight back home to Arkansas, where police questioned her for hours, day after day, until it was clear that she had almost nothing to tell them.

The police never did catch up with Mallon and Dilly, who evaded questioning without even really trying to: after recuperating for a short time in Chicago (actually, in the same Cedar Street apartment I bought many years later, located in a building across the street from my present house), they hit the campus trail as a double act. Mallon took Dill *over*, he somehow *incorporated* him, of course with his victim's full cooperation. Olson loved Mallon, too, as much as my girlfriend and Boats did, and I guess he was content to follow his idol around the country, doing whatever he was asked to do. My information about Dill Olson's fate came from Lee, who had some sort of intermittent, flickering, but nonetheless reliable connection to him. I was never to know any of the specifics about this, of course, as I had missed the boat, definitively, and so had been spared the mysterious experience that came to define their lives. There was a magic circle, and I stood beyond of its periphery.

Here's who was inside the circle, and this is what they wound up doing:

Hootie Bly, we learned, had become a permanent resident of the psychiatric ward at the Lamont Hospital, where he spoke only in quotations from Hawthorne and outbursts of unknown words from Captain Fountain's dictionary.

Before graduation, Jason "Boats" Boatman left school and became a full-time professional thief. Was that enough, could that have been enough for him?

Dilly Olson had surrendered his life to the man he had unofficially adopted as his father, and this was what he gained from his surrender: a sec-

ondhand imitation of a life, a weary existence as the magician's apprentice, subsisting on scraps that fell from the master's hand, being clothed in the master's cast-offs, and sleeping on strangers' couches with the brokenhearted girls his master discarded. Years later, Lee told me that Mallon had retired, but Don Olson was carrying on as the mage's replacement, or the new, improved model, or something similar. He had learned a lot in the intervening years, he had digested the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the *I Ching*, and the works of Giordano Bruno, Raymond Lully, Norman O. Brown, and God knows who else, and the trade of traveling guru, after all, was all he knew. But still. When I think of the heroic boy he once was . . .

Of Meredith Bright and Brett Milstrap I knew nothing, but presumably they each had a story to tell, should I be able to find them.

And of course the final figure left standing within the circle was my wife, Lee Truax, the most beautiful woman in any room she happened to enter, blessed with intelligence, courage, excellent health, a stunning house, a wonderful career as board member, counselor, and troubleshooter to the noble ACB. Her husband loved her, however imperfect his literal faithfulness, and the basis of his not inconsiderable success, his breakthrough book, *The Agents of Darkness*, had been his attempt to deal with the unfathomable event in the meadow and could therefore be seen as a tribute to the woman to whom it was dedicated. (Nearly all of his books were dedicated to his wife.) Thanks to this husband, myself, she had and always would have enough money never to worry about her finances. However, Lee Truax had been afflicted, too, cruelly, and although her affliction had first made itself known only in her early thirties, since when it had darkened and deepened, she had understood immediately that its origin had been Mallon's great event in the meadow.



There they were, my wife and onetime friends, still in their sacred circle; and here was I, on the outside, after all the intervening decades still baffled by what had happened to them.

A well-known voice on NPR had brought Hawthorne to me, and after Hawthorne, Hootie Bly, still interred in that damned mental hospital. Because of Hootie, everything else had flooded in. The lean hound coursing through the snow, the peeling lacquer on our sleds, the whole townscape of Madison's west side, a glass of water shining like the epitome of everything that could not be known, all that eluded definition . . . The faces of those who had been my most intimate friends, who had shared everything with me until the moment I refused to follow them into discipleship: their beautiful faces blazed before me. Half of their incandescence was what we had meant to each other, and the other half came from precisely what I had never known, never understood.

Why had they, each in his or her own way, not only jumped off the rails but jumped into such distorted lives? For a second, the room wobbled and everything in my life seemed at stake.

I needed to know: as soon as that recognition struck me, I knew that I feared whatever might turn up in the effort to know what had really happened out there in the meadow. Yet, *I needed to know*, and my need was stronger than the fear of whatever might crawl out of the knowledge I might turn up. All this time, I admitted to myself, I had been jealous of them for whatever they had *seen* out there, no matter that it had screwed them up, each in a different way.

Her Level Gaze had just withered away beneath my hand, and although I had become fascinated with Detective Cooper's fearsome revelations about the Hayward family—Two dark stars! Direct genetic transmission of a dreadful psychopathology! And this poor old brutal detective, taking his secrets to a beer-sodden grave!—I didn't really want to give a year or more of my life to writing about it all.

Honestly, I thought it was beyond me. My agent and my publisher were making tactful noises about a nonfiction book, but as I stood in my kitchen and wiped startled tears from my face the last thing on my mind was the possibility of writing about my lost world, my lost ruined friends, and

whatever my wife might have hidden from me. (Hidden to protect me, even.) No, I realized, I didn't have to write about it. In fact I really did not want to put this warm and breathing material, only just glimpsed, through all the familiar, sometimes laborious gestures demanded by writing. Right then, all of that effort felt mechanical and factory-like, industrial. What I glimpsed had sped away into invisibility, like a white hare tracked through deep snow . . . I wanted the experience of following the ever-vanishing hare, not the experience of turning the pursuit into writing.

So, fine. Maybe I didn't have a book. What I did have, a project that had come wrapped in necessity, felt infinitely better.

The first thing I did, once I had calmed down sufficiently to use a keyboard, was to e-mail Lee in Washington. It was her past as well as mine, and if I intended to open a curtain she had insisted on keeping closed, she deserved to know about it. For the rest of the afternoon, instead of pretending to work I caught up on my Netflix movies (*Wall-E* and *The Dark Knight*), and about once an hour checked my cell phone for e-mail. I did not actually expect Lee to reply immediately, but at 6:22 my time, 7:22 hers, she responded by telling me that it would be interesting to see how far I got. (Lee uses various speech recognition systems, and while her early attempts resulted in a lot of typos and mistaken words, by now her messages are generally free of errors.) And she was writing back so quickly, she explained, because she had just learned something that might be useful to me. Donald Olson had run into some trouble a couple of years ago, and in fact she had heard that he was just being released from jail in a day or two and would undoubtedly be grateful for a place to stay on his first few nights of freedom. If I liked, I could meet him for lunch somewhere in Chicago, and if he passed muster, invite him to use our guest room. It would be all right with her, she assured me.

I e-mailed back, thanking her for the information about our long-ago friend, and said that if she truly would not mind, I would probably do as she suggested. How, if I dare ask, had she learned of Olson's situation? And how could I get in touch with him?

You know I have my sources, she wrote back. But don't worry about writing to Don. I gather that he prefers to get in touch with people rather than the other way around.

I'll wait to hear from him then, I told her. How are things going, anyhow? Are you enjoying yourself?

Busy busy busy, she wrote back. Meetings meetings meetings. Sometimes the mills grind exceeding small, but I have a lot of ACB friends in the DC area who seem willing to listen to me complain. Please let me know what happens with Don Olson, will you?

I typed, *o.c. o.c.*, using our ancient code that meant of course, of course.

Then for a couple of days I read, watched movies, took walks, and waited for the phone to ring. One day it did.