

June 30

What did that sign say?

He looked into the rearview mirror and stared at the back of the traffic sign, its reflection shrinking inside the mirror's plastic frame as the sedan sped along the road.

Shit. How am I supposed to get there when I don't even know if I'm going the right direction? Maybe I should just head home and forget the entire thing.

The road divided, two lanes continuing north, two veering east. A rectangle blue sign with white letters stood on a grassy embankment alongside the road that traveled north.

West Haven Next Three Exits	
Clellan Road	1 Mile
Addlington Avenue	2 Miles
Union Street	2½ Miles

Going to West Haven, so I guess I'll stay on this road. But which exit do I want? The middle one sounds familiar. Wait. Addlington Elementary, where I went to school. Can't remember if it was on Addlington Avenue, but that seems like the exit I should take.

The road expanded into a four-lane highway. Dark asphalt replaced the weathered concrete, and a grassy median covered with clover separated the opposing lanes of traffic. The reflective white lines and dashes on the pavement gleamed in the diffused sunlight that shone through the overcast sky. After cutting across a flatland carpeted with wild carrot and black-eyed Susan, the highway crossed a concrete bridge that spanned a sluggish river speckled with algae.

Something's wrong. According to the map, West Haven's on the southern shore of the river, but the sign did say West Haven next three exits, so I must be headed the right way. Still. Remember sitting in the school bus in the morning, riding through West Haven, looking east, watching the sun rise over the river. Can remember that so clearly.

Of course. It's been a long time since I've been in West Haven. Surprised I remembered the name. Surprised I remembered anything about my childhood.

He glanced at the murky river.

What shitty water. Wonder if I ever swam in that? Hope not. It looks like it's teeming with pollution and disease.

On the opposite riverbank, the highway passed through a copse of gnarled oak trees. Small puddles spotted the pavement, while drops of rainwater clung to the leaves of the trees. On the crest of a hill, a ramp descended from the highway into a wooded gully, its entrance marked by a small blue sign that read EXIT.

Think that was the first exit for West Haven, but I didn't see any signs. Stupid rednecks think they're the only ones who use these roads. Just because they know what the roads are and where they go doesn't mean everyone does.

Should probably pay more attention. Don't want to miss my exit. Hate to think where I'd end up.

The highway cut through a windbreak of chestnut trees and crossed a steel arch bridge. In the valley below, sluggish brown water flowed around a dozen diamond-shaped boulders.

Is that the same river? It looks like the same shitty water. Maybe the road cuts back across the river and heads down into West Haven. That must be what it does.

A tiny white placard splattered with beige muck marked the center of the bridge.



West Haven
Township

Shit. Almost missed that one, too. Can't believe how badly marked everything is. At least my exit should be coming up soon.

Just beyond the bridge, the highway passed through a tunnel with a flagstone facade and emerged on a vast farmland. To the north, several weathered barns dotted the landscape, while to the south, fields of lettuce and cauliflower filled a shallow hollow.

This doesn't look right. West Haven should be somewhere on my left, in a valley, by the river, not in the middle of a pasture.

Shit.

He jerked the steering wheel to the right and guided the black sedan onto an exit ramp, its wheels skidding on the slightly warped pavement. He glanced at the berm of the highway. A small blue sign stood 100 feet beyond the ramp.

Who puts the sign after the exit? This is such a stupid fucking place. Grateful we

moved when we did. Hate to think what sort of life I would've had if we'd stayed in West Haven.

He stopped at a three-way intersection. A green sign rose from a patch of foxtail on the opposite side of the intersection.

⇒ West Haven	2
⇐ Benjamin	4

How did West Haven end up on my right? It should be on the left. What should I do? Follow my instincts, or follow the sign?

A tinny squawk, barely audible over the roar of the air conditioner, resonated through the passenger compartment.

What the fuck?

He peered into the rearview mirror. A red subcompact edged toward the sedan's bumper. He watched its round headlights vanish beneath the sedan's trunk.

If that asshole got any closer, he'd be eating my shit.

He glanced at the driver. A young man with square plastic-rimmed glasses and straight hair glared over the steering wheel, his lips gyrating, tiny globules of spittle spraying the windshield. The young man slammed his palm into the steering wheel, and a grating squawk reverberated through the sedan's trunk.

"Fuck you, shithead."

Checking the road on his left, he pressed the accelerator halfway to the floor. The sedan lurched forward, its eight-cylinder engine churning beneath its hood.

Let's see if your little piece of shit can keep up with my car.

He glanced into the rearview mirror. The subcompact entered the road behind him.

What's wrong with the side of his car? The window's dark, like it was painted black. No. It's covered with a plastic garbage bag, and the body is nothing but rust and primer paint. What a cheap piece of shit.

Don't know why that asshole's in such a hurry. He's obviously not rushing off to work. If he had a job, he'd be driving a better car. Of course. Anyone with a job would be at work in the middle of the day, not driving along some shitty road in the middle of fucking nowhere.

He watched subcompact speed toward him in the rearview mirror.

Don't even think about passing me.

Pressing on the accelerator, he smiled and settled into the leather seat. The cool sterile air that blew from the vents flowed over his arms, rippling his shirtsleeves.

As he drove, shopping plazas, car dealerships, and fast food restaurants replaced the farmland. The road widened into four lanes separated by a turning lane. He stopped at a traffic light near the entrance for a shopping mall.

Addlington Mall. A gathering of 250 stores for your shopping pleasure. It must've been built after we left. Mother definitely would've come here if it existed back then. Wonder if this is part of West Haven? If it is, it's certainly not the West Haven I know.

The traffic signal above the turning lane switched to green, and a string of cars entered the mall's parking lot. A red and black blur passed him.

It's that asshole in that shitbox.

As the subcompact swung through the intersection, he stared through its rear window.

Come on, you little shit. Look in your mirror, look back so I can give you the finger.

He watched the car's taillights disappear into the parking lot.

What an asshole, acting like he had to be somewhere important. It's only a stupid mall. He probably works there, with the rest of West Haven's losers, if he even has a job.

After passing through a suburban landscape, the road narrowed to two lanes, and fields speckled with Indian tobacco and black-eyed Susan surrounded it. A red-tailed hawk circled above a solitary bitternut hickory. He stared into the rearview mirror.

I'm the only one on the road. Wonder why? Probably because there's nothing out here but wilderness. Knew that sign was wrong.

A quarter mile later, he drove past a ranch house with a low roof and an overgrown lawn. The cinder berms smoothed into tarmac, and the road intersected a narrow street.

Addlington Avenue and Majahwahnee Drive. That doesn't sound familiar. What sort of name is Majahwahnee anyway? Not even certain I'm pronouncing it right. How are you supposed to tell people where you live if you can't pronounce the name of the street?

Addlington Avenue continued through a residential neighborhood of squat brick houses separated by narrow strips of grass. Young trees sprouted from the lawns, their full branches engulfing the rows of wires that stretched between the telephone poles.

It's starting to look more like a town, but it still doesn't look like the West Haven I know.

At the edge of the neighborhood, the avenue dipped into a broad valley that stretched from east to west. Boxy buildings arranged on a massive treeless grid covered the eastern half of the valley, while an immense park bordered by brownstones and Victorian mansions filled its western half. The dull sunlight accentuated a subtle bluish haze that hovered above the valley.

Is that West Haven? Don't remember it being so huge. And where's the river?

He stopped at a traffic light just below the valley's rim. A tall brick building with a gently sloping roof sat on the right side of the street, its two broad wooden doors supported on bulky brass hinges. A red sign with gold antique letters stood on the lawn.

West Haven V.F.D. No. 1
Established 1883

Actually in West Haven. That sign in front of the firehouse confirms it. Wonder why I don't recognize anything?

No. There is something familiar about this place. Remember passing it on the way to school. There was something special we always looked for. It wasn't the firehouse. It looks new, like it was built after we moved. Wonder what?

As he drove through the intersection, he studied the fire station, its shadow gray in the faint sunlight. A circular garden of wild flowers occupied one corner of the lawn.

That's why I remember the firehouse.

On an unpolished granite pedestal in the garden, shaded by an old oak tree, was the bronze statue of a firefighter, his helmet resting on his head, his unbuttoned coat exposing a thick torso. He carried a heavy bronze ax, and metallic jack-boots covered his feet. A bronze plaque on the pedestal reflected blurred images of the cars on the avenue.

WILLIE FOGELBE 1859-1904

Founder of the West Haven Fire Department and the town's first Fire Chief. Perished in the line of duty, November 9, 1904, while rescuing children from a schoolhouse turned inferno.

Willie Fogelbe. Remember that name. There was some story about his ghost and kids who misbehaved. What did he do to bad kids? Punish them? No. Worse. He kidnapped them and killed them. That was the big threat when we were kids. Parents, teachers, all the adults, used to tell us Willie Fogelbe's ghost would get us if we misbehaved. They said you could always tell when someone was bad because he would disappear and blood would appear on the blade of the statue's axe.

Remember that actually happening. Some bully didn't show up for days, and someone said Willie Fogelbe finally got him, so during recess, we sneaked off to check the statue. When we got there, we saw blood on the axe. Remember that so clearly now. There was more to the story though. The kid showed up at school the next day. He'd

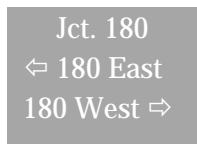
been at home with chicken pox or something, and the blood on the axe was just rust. Think that's the story. Wonder how I can find out if that's what happened? Probably can't. Will probably never know what happened.

Why did Willie Fogelbe hate bad kids? It had something to do with the fire that killed him. Think all the kids had evacuated the schoolhouse, but a couple of kids thought they'd play a joke. When the fire department arrived, they told Willie some kids were trapped in the cloak room. They said they had run into the cloak room to get their coats when the fire started and they were still in the building. Willie ran into the burning schoolhouse, hoping to save them. While he was in there, the roof caved in, and he burned to death.

Willie's wife blamed those kids for killing her husband. She cursed all bad children to be haunted by her husband's ghost. Shortly after that, the kids who sent Willie into the schoolhouse disappeared and were never heard from again. The legend was Willie's ghost dragged them to hell. Think that's the story. It was pretty effective story, too. We never did anything seriously wrong. We were too terrified of Willie's ghost.

Wonder why those kids did that like that? Wonder what makes kids act so stupid? They do the dumbest things. What goes through their minds?

At the base of the hill, he stopped at an intersection near a gas station. Fine scratches etched in the windshield glistened silver in the faint sunlight. Ignoring the scratches, he stared at a yellow sign attached to a telephone pole on the opposite corner.



Junction 180? Thought I followed 180 to the exit for Addlington Avenue. Never saw any signs telling me to turn onto 180. Wait. Did miss that sign just before the road split. It must've said business 180 went to the right, and the bypass was straight. Should've turned right on business 180, but took the bypass instead. Just glad I saw this sign.

Suppose I should go west. The ad for the hotel said it was on west business 180. Guess I'll get to tour West Haven and see what it looks like after all these years. Wonder if it looks the same? Doubt it. Nothing looked familiar until I saw that statue of Willie Fogelbe.

How long has it been since I've been in West Haven? 23 years? 24? Think I was 10 when we went to live with grandma and grandpa. Yes. We moved a month or two before my eleventh birthday. Remember grandpa bought me that black and green fishing rod that year so I could go fishing with him. Wonder when we moved exactly? It

must've been in June or July because I remember school had finished.

How did it happen? She put me in that piece of shit she called a car, in the middle of the night, while I was still asleep. She never told me we were going. Just woke up in the car the next morning and found myself in front of some house I'd never seen before. We just showed up on their doorstep without any warning we were coming. I didn't get any warning either. Didn't even know I had grandparents until that moment.

That was 25 years ago. It seems like three centuries ago. Can't believe how much my life has changed since then. Shit. Can't even believe how much my life has changed in the past year. Can't believe what a complete mess it is.

A motorcade led by a charcoal gray hearse cut across the street, stopping the flow of traffic. Two black limousines with miniature maroon FUNERAL flags magnetically attached to their fenders followed the hearse through a bulky iron gate, into an old churchyard populated with limestone headstones.

Wonder if my father's buried in a place like this? Some quaint country graveyard, beside a white chapel, with plenty of trees. Mother never said where he's buried. She never mentioned a city, not even a country. She just said overseas. That could be anywhere on the planet.

And the cause? He died in a plane crash. She gave me no other details. Have no idea if he was the pilot or a passenger. He could've been anyone. He might've even been someone famous. Will probably never know.

All I do know is that he's dead and he's the reason we moved to West Haven. Mother got the news in the afternoon. She couldn't handle it and didn't want to live in the same place anymore. That night, she loaded our clothes and some belongings in the car, took me from bed, loaded me in the car, and drove off.

Remember waking up on the front seat when we were driving through West Haven. Saw we were in some town I'd never seen before. Asked her where we were. She told me it was our new home. Asked why we needed a new home. She said your father's gone away. Asked where he went. Her only response was he wouldn't be coming back. Can't remember if I cried or not.

Don't recall missing my father. Actually. Don't remember anything about him. Wonder if that's normal? Most kids have memories of their fathers from childhood, but most kids have their fathers around when they're growing up, and most fathers are involved in their kids lives. Not me though. It's like I never had a father. Of course. Was only four or five when he died.

Might be why I never cared about the guy. If I truly cared about him, would've missed him or would remember missing him, but it's like he never existed, like I

hatched from an egg. Guess that would make my mother a chicken. No. She's certainly not a chicken. She's more like a dog, a bitch. The bitch. That's the perfect description. Stupid selfish bitch.

Wonder if anyone in West Haven remembers her? If they do, hope I don't meet them. Don't want to talk about her. Wouldn't even know what to say about her.

A large grocery store with a recently resurfaced parking lot occupied a block on the right side of the street. A green aluminum awning spanned the store's facade, while seven letter-shaped light cases that jutted from the awning spelled its name: FOSTER'S.

Foster's Market. That's where mother worked. The building was half that size when she worked there, and it didn't have a parking lot. The store came right up to the street. Think there was an empty lot or abandoned building behind it back then.

At the intersection adjacent to Foster's parking lot, he saw several brown signs attached to a telephone pole.

Fort Marseinne	↗
Hardwick Common	↖
Coulter House	↖
Eli Whitcombe Park	↖
Quaker Promenade	↑

Recognize those names. That's the West Haven I remember. Quiet, little, historic buildings and parks everywhere. I forgot about the parks. You can't go 10 feet without stumbling into one. It seemed like there were more parks and gardens than houses.

To his right, a lawn stretched toward a languid river, its uncut grass rustling in a gentle breeze. Rough blocks of black rock arranged in an uneven pentagon filled the lawn. A squat cast iron sign with ivory letters identified the blocks as Fort Marseinne. A narrow building with a back porch that extended over the river separated the lawn from a park dotted with weeping willows and thickets of wisteria.

Quaker Promenade. It's been so long since I've been here, but it seems so familiar, almost like it hasn't changed. It's probably the only thing in West Haven that hasn't changed.

As he drove along the promenade, he watched the river until a copse of red mulberry trees screened it from view. A two-story U-shaped building with concrete loggias that overlooked a parking lot faced the mulberry trees, its name written in plastic yellow letters on its brick facade.

The Siminasas Motor Lodge. That's the place. Didn't realize it was inside the city limits. Thought it would've been a little further out in the country. Don't remember it

being here. Wait. Remember they just started to lay the foundation the last week of school the year we left. They brought in the earthmovers and backhoes, and we couldn't wait for summer so we could play in the construction zone.

Who was that kid I used to play with? Remember we rode the bus together. Would go over to his house when the weather wasn't bad. Don't think he lived that far away. Used to walk there. He was my best friend. We did everything together.

Wonder what he's doing now? Wonder if he still lives in West Haven? Doubt it. It's a nice, attractive place, but there's nothing to do and no way to support yourself.

He entered the motor lodge's parking lot and pulled into an empty space marked RESERVED FOR CHECK-INS.

There are cars in the other check-in spaces, and the parking lot's nearly filled. Why are so many people visiting West Haven? I'm here only because I felt like I had to come back.

He glanced at the office and saw his sedan reflected in a picture window beneath a green-and-yellow awning.

Suppose I should leave the luggage in the trunk. Don't know where my room will be. Could be on the other side of the parking lot.

He opened the door. The cry of a catbird greeted him, and the scent of wet pavement filled his nostrils. As he stepped from the chilly passenger compartment, his skin began tingling in the warm, humid air.

Didn't think it would be so hot today. The air felt pretty cool when I left the house this morning. Of course. That was hours ago. Hope it won't be like this the rest of the week. Would hate to be tramping through the woods in the heat and humidity. It would be like a rainforest.

More accustomed to being in an air conditioned office than in this heat, and I've become so pale from being inside all the time. Just hope I don't get sunburned. Wonder if I should buy some sunscreen?

He entered a narrow office furnished with dark green carpeting, cherry-stained paneling, and a counter that stretched along the rear wall. The room smelled of stale cigarette smoke.

"Good afternoon, sir." A young man wearing an emerald jacket with a yellow crest stood behind the counter beside a computer terminal. Smiling, he pushed an open magazine with curled pages to the side. "Welcome to the Siminasas Motor Lodge. How can I help you?"

"My name's Harold Jenkins. I have a reservation for the week."

"Okay, Mr. Jenkins, let me check the computer, and we'll have you registered and in

your room in a few minutes.”

He watched the clerk type on the keyboard.

His ear is pierced. At least he has the decency to not wear an earring at work. Hate it when people who serve me look like filthy freaks. Especially in restaurants. See a dirty waiter, and have to wonder about the cook. Don't want some unbathed slob preparing my food.

“Here you are. Mr. Harold Jenkins. Nonsmoking room, single occupancy, six nights.”

“That's it, but I have question. I might only need to be here for two or three days, so if I don't stay the entire time, will I be billed for all six nights?”

“No, sir, we total your bill when you check out, and you're only charged for the number of nights you spent here regardless of the number you reserved.”

“That's good.”

“Did you want to use the same credit card you used to make the reservation?”

“Yes. Do you need the card?”

“No, I have all the information right on the computer. Just give me a moment to activate your file and assign a room.” He pressed several keys on the keyboard. “Is room 223 okay?”

“I guess so. Where is it?”

“It's in this wing, on the second floor, third room from the stairwell.”

“That sounds good to me.”

“Okay. It will be ready in a second.”

Can't believe checking in to a hotel is so easy. Last time I did this, it was a pain in the ass. They had to write everything down, needed my driver's license, and had to call to get approval for the credit card. When that was? When Wendy and I took the kids to the beach. Harry had just turned seven, and Georgie didn't know how to tie his shoes. That was our last vacation together.

“Okay, Mr. Jenkins, you're all set for room 223.” The clerk tore a perforated form from a printer and set it on the counter. “I'll just need your signature at the bottom there.” He pointed at a thin line beside a bold X.

Harold signed his name with a pen tethered to a brass holder. A short wavy line followed the H and J, while a blot of black ink crowned the rounded peak that represented the I in Jenkins. He stared at the signature.

It looks so sloppy. Can't even read it. Maybe I should ask for a new form. Write a little slower, concentrate more, make it legible.

Taking the form, the clerk removed the bottom page and handed it to Harold.

“Okay, Mr. Jenkins, here’s your key.” He gave Harold a plastic electronic key shaped like a credit card with a series of holes punched in one end. “When you’re ready to check out, just bring the key back, and we’ll process your final bill, or you can notify us the night before you’re ready to check out, and we can process everything then so all you’ll have to do is drop the key off the next morning.”

“That’s convenient.” Guess it’s too late to re-sign my name. Wonder if I sign everything like that?

“There are some things you’ll need to know to survive your stay with us. The maids usually start cleaning around 11, unless you put out the Do Not Disturb sign. We offer a dry cleaning service. You’ll find the information for that in your room. The pool is open from 8 to 8, but please be advised there is no lifeguard on duty. My name is Stephan. I’m usually on duty in the afternoons, so if you have any requests—fresh towels, more pillows, restaurant reservations, whatever—just give me a call, and I’ll do whatever I can. Do you have any questions?”

“Just one. How do I get to my room?”

“Make a left when you leave the office, and you’ll find the stairs between this wing and the middle one. You’ll also find an ice machine and some vending machines in the stairwell.”

“Thanks.” He went to the door.

“Thank you, and have a pleasant stay in West Haven.”

“I plan on it.”

He stepped outside into the humid air. Puddles of rainwater lay on the pavement, reflecting a splotchy veil of pale gray clouds overhead. Along the western horizon, patches of blue sky peered through the thinning clouds. He glanced at the doors that lined the loggia, their brass numbers gleaming against their jade paint.

Room 223 is pretty close to that end. It makes sense to move the car near the stairs. Save myself from having to carrying everything too far.

He sat in the sedan and pulled the door closed. The chilly air inside the passenger compartment sent goose bumps across his arms and legs.

Just what I want to feel on a hot summer day, manmade cold. Almost need a sweater in here. Could probably make it snow if I wanted to. That might be a little too cold though. Not particularly fond of extreme cold.

Backing from the space, he drove toward the rear of the parking lot. At the end of the row, he turned right and entered the next aisle.

Can’t believe this place is that crowded. There’s nothing to do in West Haven, nothing to see. Why would so many people stay here?

Midway through the aisle, he pulled into an empty space.

Not much closer than where I was. Suppose it could be worse. Could be beside the pool and get pool water splashed on the car. If chlorine can eat through clothes and bleach hair, don't want to think what it would do my paint job.

After releasing the trunk from inside, he walked to the back of the sedan and lifted the lid. A full-sized suitcase, a vinyl duffel bag, and a leather valise filled the carpeted compartment.

Why did I bring so much shit? Only going to be here for a couple of days. No wonder Gina laughed and said I packed like a girl. Wonder how much she'd pack for a week? Knowing her, she probably wouldn't take more than an extra pair of pants, some panties, and another pair of shoes, and she'd probably squeeze everything into that bowling bag-size purse she has.

He stared into the trunk.

Brought all this shit here. Might as well take it up to the room.

He slung the duffel bag over his right shoulder. Tucking the leather valise under his left arm, he grabbed the suitcase with his left hand.

Can get everything in one trip, and still have a free hand.

After closing the trunk, he walked to the breezeway between the eastern and southern wings of the motor lodge. He stopped at the base of the concrete staircase, his foot propped on the bottom step, sweat gathering under his arms and across his chest.

Can't believe this. Out of breath already and sweating like a cow. It must be from the humidity. That's only logical explanation.

He glanced at a bulky red ice machine along the opposite wall. A line drawing of a polar bear sitting on a block of ice decorated its door. A battered orange newspaper machine stood beside the staircase, the front page of the West Haven Town Chronicle displayed in its window.

Groaning, he grasped the aluminum railing and climbed the stairs. He stared along the length of the concrete balcony. Green rubber welcome mats laid in front of each door.

Guess it's not as far as it seems, but it feels like 20 miles when you're carrying all this shit. Just glad I'm not in Room 230.

Removing the electronic key from his pocket, he unlocked the door and pushed it open with his foot. As he entered the room, stale humid air that reeked of disinfectant engulfed him.

Shit. It's hot in here, and it stinks like a hospital. Wonder how long it's been since they rented this room? Wonder if I should request another one? No. Would just have to

haul this shit to some other room. Just keep this one. Maybe if I turn up the air conditioner, cool this place off, air it out some, maybe it won't be so terrible.

He tossed the duffel bag on the bed and dropped the valise beside it. Spinning around, he heaved the suitcase onto a flimsy folding rack that stood beside a writing desk, its legs wobbling beneath the weight.

It's gloomy in here, too.

He hit two light switches on the wall beside the door. A lamp on the writing desk and a wall sconce on each side of the bed lit up, their bulbs casting yellow circles on the ceiling.

It's not much of an improvement, but it's better than being in the dark. Now, time to do something about this heat.

Lifting a metal flap on the top of the air conditioner, he pressed several buttons on a control panel. The unit began humming, and a jet of cool air erupted from a grille on its front.

That should make this place more bearable. It's a good thing the air conditioner worked. If it didn't, I would've gone down to the office and bitched about it.

He looked around the room.

Where I should put my clothes? The shirts can go in the closet, the pants and underwear in the dresser, and the shoes under the desk. Can't believe I brought so much stuff. Only going to be in West Haven for a couple of days. Talk to some people, go tramping through the woods. Don't need an entire wardrobe for that. Should've listened to Gina and left most of this at home.

After unpacking his clothes, he placed the duffel bag in the open suitcase on the folding rack and set the valise on the floor under it. He took a manila folder from a pouch on the inside lid of the suitcase. A white label on the folder identified its contents, the words handwritten in blue ink: WEST HAVEN UFO INFORMATION.

It looks more legible than my signature. Still. Wonder if anyone else can read it? Doubt it. Never realized my handwriting is so shitty. Have to start writing slower, more legibly.

He removed several photocopied newspaper articles from the folder. The blurry masthead of the West Haven Town News stretched above the first article. Numerous blue and yellow streaks spotted the page, the names of people highlighted in blue, narrative phrases in yellow. He scanned the highlighted portions.

Don't recognize any of these names. Even the events seem so distant, so unreal, almost too bizarre to believe.

His eyes rested on a paragraph, marked with bright yellow ink, near the end of the

article.

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Whatever anyone may say about the last night's occurrences, all authorities questioned are steadfast in their positions. Sometime around 7:30 p.m. yesterday, a meteoroid entered the Earth's atmosphere and burst into flames from the excessive heat of its descent through our atmosphere. The meteor's course carried it southward through the skies over West Haven and into the undeveloped fields south of the city, where it impacted with the Earth. Within two hours, the Army National Guard and Army Corps of Engineers arrived on the scene to recover and dispose of the meteorite to avoid any radiation contamination which may have resulted from its contact with cosmic rays and other interstellar radiations.
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It might've been almost 30 years ago, I might've forgotten about it for a couple of years, but I remember everything that happened that night, from the time I first saw it to the time I fell asleep by the window. What I saw was definitely not a meteorite.

* * *

Six-year-old Harold Jenkins sat on the living room floor in the house his mother rented from Jacob Whitley. He colored a connect-the-dots picture of an American flag, his schoolbooks scattered beside him on the thin carpet. Madeline Jenkins slouched on the couch above him, staring at a game show on the television.

Harold stopped coloring, distracted by a commercial that appeared on the flicking black-and-white screen. A cartoon dachshund professed his eternal love for Astro Age dog food. After licking the can, the dachshund began turning cartwheels. As it tumbled across the screen, a loud boom rumbled through the house, rattling the plates in the china cabinet and vibrating the windows in their frames.

Harold and his mother startled.

"What was that, mommie?"

“I don’t know. It sounded like a sonic boom.” She walked to the window. Pushing the drape aside, she gazed at the sky.

“What’s a sonic boom?” He followed her to the window, but her body blocked his view.

“It’s a noise a plane makes when it goes really fast.”

“Oh.” He poked his head under her arm. Brilliant colors layered the early evening sky, the dark blue above the house brightening to green and white before shifting to yellow and red near the horizon. A strip of mauve clouds hovered above the horizon, their edges reflecting orange light from the setting sun.

He placed a hand on the window, his fingers splayed. The cool glass vibrated beneath his fingertips.

“Mommie, why’s the window humming?”

“It’s not just the window. It’s the whole house. Can you feel it?”

“Yeah.” The vibrating floor massaged his feet and made his legs tingle. The adjacent wall creaked. “What’s going on, mommie?”

“I don’t know.” She went to the front door and stepped outside.

He followed her into the yard. The ground felt cold against his bare soles. Everything resonated with a baritone hum that filled the air—the small white house, the forest behind it, the grass on the lawn, the cornfields across the road.

“Mommie, where’s that noise coming from?”

“Over there.” She pointed toward the north.

He stared at the northern horizon. “It sounds like the ocean in a seashell, but louder. I can feel the noise in my tummy. It feels like it’s going to shake me until I fall apart.”

As the hum intensified to a roar, a shimmering ellipsoid appeared in the northwestern corner of the sky, hurtling through the air 100 feet above the treetops. Tangerine-colored flames streamed behind the object, tinting the landscape pink. Aubergine smoke trailed the flames, marking the object’s path. The ellipsoid flew south before turning a tight right angle and continuing east, the smoke plume forming a dark L in the sky.

He watched the object rocket toward the horizon. It disappeared behind a tree-lined ridge. The roar diminished to a hum, but the air, trees, and ground still vibrated. Moments later, the hum ended, and a tremendous crack rumbled across the landscape, shaking the trees and the house. As the crack echoed through the nearby valleys, the earth beneath him shook, throwing him to the lawn face first.

The air became silent, and calm descended.

His heart beat against his ribs, and his blood surged through his skull. The grass

tickled his cheek, while the ground chilled his exposed stomach. The odor of ozone permeated the air.

He glanced at his mother. She knelt on the lawn near him, her fingers pressed against her thighs. She stared at the grass, her face pale.

He jumped up. "What was that, mommie?"

She looked at him but said nothing.

"I think it was a falling star. That's what it was, wasn't it, mommie?"

"I don't know." Shuddering, she stared at the sky. The smoke trail softened in a gentle breeze, the distinct right angle blurring into an arc. "I think it was one of those meteor things."

"Let's go find it. Maybe it'll bring us good luck. Maybe it's made of pennies or candy."

He began running toward the road, the uncut grass cushioning his footfalls. As he passed his mother, she lunged toward him, arms outstretched. Her fingers snagged his shirttail, and she yanked him to the ground. Clutching his arm, she dragged him toward the house.

"I want to go see the star."

"We're going inside." She hastened her pace, and his feet bounced across the lawn.

As they reached the front door, she pushed him inside, and he sprawled onto the steps that led upstairs. She bolted the door, the chain for the security lock banging against the jamb. Hurrying into the living room, she closed the window blinds.

He rolled over and sat on the steps. "Why can't we go see the star?" He rubbed the red imprint her hand left on his bicep.

She glared at him, her eyes bulging, wisps of her tousled brown hair framing her face. "Go to your room, and lock the door. Now." She pointed toward the ceiling.

"I don't want to."

"Don't you dare make me carry you up those stairs." She stood over him, screaming into his face.

He cringed against the steps. "Why aren't you happy about the star?"

"Get your ass up those stairs. Now."

He crawled up the steps backward, watching her. She glowered at him, her cheeks flushed, her fists clenched. As he slid across the top step, he leapt onto the landing and ran down the hall, his feet thumping on the worn floorboards. He slammed the door to his room before jumping on the bed.

* * *

The next morning, she didn't say anything about what happened, and we never

talked about it. Actually. We never talked about anything. She never had the time for me, never had the time to tell me about herself or her life. Whatever I found out about her, had to hear it from grandma and grandpa. Even then, learned most of it from eavesdropping on their conversations. It seemed like no one ever wanted to tell me anything.

He glanced at the photocopies in his hands.

At least I know it happened. Funny. So many people saw it, but no one agrees on what it was. Remember talking about it in school the next day. Most of us said it was a flying saucer or something from another planet. One kid whose dad worked at the airfield said it was a top secret airplane that crashed. Someone else said it was swamp gas. Remember getting into a fight over that one. We all beat him up.

What did our teachers say? Remember they told us about meteorites and how most of them burn up when they enter the atmosphere, but some don't burn up entirely and fall to earth. They tried to tell us that's what we saw, a meteorite that fell to earth.

Didn't believe it then, and don't believe it now. Saw the thing flying. It pivoted 90 degrees without slowing down. Saw the right angle outlined in smoke after it made the turn. No meteorite or plane could move like that.

Wonder what other people think they saw? Don't remember hearing much about it after that first day. It was in the papers the next morning, and then no one ever mentioned it again.

Wonder if anyone saw it on the ground? If the Army Corps of Engineers did take it away, someone somewhere must've seen it and touched it. Doubt those people would forget something like that. The only question is. Would they be willing to talk about it?

Wonder if anyone in West Haven will be willing to talk? After all this time, can't think of any reason why they wouldn't. Almost wish I could talk to my mother about it, but that's impossible, so I have no choice but to rely on strangers. Just hope I find someone willing to help me prove that what I think is real is truly real.

He glanced at the blue streaks scattered across the top photocopy.

Simon Policastro, police detective. He should be a reliable source. What does this say about him? First policeman responding to the army's request for assistance. Helped to close Route 265 so the Army Corps of Engineers could safely remove the meteorite.

Try him first.

He sat at a round table positioned in front of the window and stared at the West Haven directory that rested on the table beside the phone.

What a mess. The cover's torn. The pages are curled. It must've been here for years. Hope this thing has all its pages. Actually. Hope no one I want to call has moved

recently.

He grabbed the directory and began flipping through the listings.

Polianco. Polibertano. Polimare. No Policastro. Shit. He probably has an unlisted number so no one he's arrested could find him or harass him or his family. All right. Next person.

He read five names highlighted in blue ink.

What about this guy? Samuel Brodowski, professor of astronomy, West Haven Community College. Wait. It says he theorized the meteorite was a bolide, which would account for the reports of an explosion. Doubt he'll tell me anything useful, but maybe he'll tell me something he wouldn't tell the press, or maybe he has some new information.

He flipped to the front of the book.

Here it is. Brodowski. And there are plenty of listings. Harry. Lydia. P.J. Walter A. Walter M. No Samuel. Fucking figures. Pick two people with unlisted numbers. At least there are plenty of other people mentioned in these articles. Bound to find one of them. Try another article.

Sliding the top two pages to the side, he studied a three-column article photocopied from the Benjamin Examiner.

This story is pretty much the same as the one in the West Haven Town News. The only difference is it mentions the sonic boom, which seems to have been centered over Benjamin. Funny. It has the same quotes as the other article. There's Policastro and Brodowski.

Wait. It mentions someone different. Reverend Joshua Elijah Reynolds, pastor of the United Faith Mission and Ministry of Divinity, Benjamin Branch. According to the article, he believed the meteorite was a divine omen sent to intimidate the unfaithful. Just before the sonic boom, he was in his parsonage, praying for an undeniable sign from the heavens to shake the unfaithful from their wicked slumber. He heard the boom, ran outside, and saw the meteor. He called it the flaming shaft of divine vengeance and said his prayers had been answered.

Wonder why they gave so much space to a total fucking loony? Shaft of divine vengeance my ass. Show him the shaft of divine vengeance, right here in my pants.

Shit. Should call this guy because he's probably in the phonebook. Don't think a priest would have an unlisted number. People have to find him, for whatever reasons they call priests for. Wonder if he'll expect a donation for his church in exchange for information? If he does, just hang up and find someone else to call.

He turned to the back half of the directory.

Te. St. Sc. Sa. Ru. Re. Reighleigh. Reynolds. Shit. There are tons of them. Jacob. Joseph. Joshua E. Actually. Mrs. Joshua E. Reynolds. She must be his wife. No mention of her in the article, but she might've been there or might know some other people I can talk to. Being the priest's wife, she's probably the church social director and knows plenty of people.

He glanced at the number in the directory and began dialing. As he pressed the final digit, the line clicked.

"Hello, reception. This is Stephan."

Stephan? Reception? What the fuck?

"This is Harold Jenkins in room 223. I checked in a little while ago."

"Mr. Jenkins, I remember you. How can I help you?"

"I was trying to make a local call, but when I dialed the number, I got you."

"I forgot to tell you about the telephone hook-up fee. My mistake. I'm so sorry."

"Telephone hook-up fee?"

"It's only a few dollars, and it's refunded when you check out. Local calls are free, and long distance calls are automatically added to your bill. Those charges are payable when you check out, unless you use a calling card or credit card, in which case they're free."

"If the calls are automatically tacked onto my bill, why do I need to pay a hook-up fee?"

"It's just our policy to make sure you know the long distance charges will be added to your bill, or if for some reason you leave without paying, we keep the fee to cover any long distance calls you may have made."

"That's stupid. I should just be able to pick up the phone and call whoever I want to."

"You can do that in just one minute. I'll patch your line through to the switchboard, and you can make as many calls as you'd like."

"How long will that take? An hour or two?"

"Less than a minute. I can do it through the computer, while you're still on the line. Give me 30 seconds, and you'll be connected. Will there be anything else, Mr. Jenkins?"

"No, not right now."

"Okay, I'll hook up you right up, and I do apologize for not telling you about the phone when you checked in. If you need anything else, please feel free to call, or just stop by the office. Thank you, and have a nice day."

He dropped the handset on the cradle.

Fucking freak. He probably forgot to tell me because he's too strung out on drugs or

daydreaming about his boyfriend's hairy ass. The little faggot. What sort of hotel would hire someone with a pierced ear anyway? Must be one of those sleazy shitholes where they'll give you hourly rates if you know the secret password. Wonder if prostitutes use this place?

He studied the room.

The sheets look fresh, and they're pulled tight. The pillow cases are white, and they look clean. At least there aren't stains or makeup or anything on them. The garbage can's empty, and the plastic liner looks new. Can see vacuum marks on the carpet. Maybe the room was cleaned recently, maybe even this morning, and there's no condom machine in the bathroom, no mirrors on the ceilings, no waterbeds, no tacky red satin sheets. All right. Maybe it is a family place.

Still. That doesn't explain the freak at the desk. Maybe he didn't get his ear pierced until after they hired his gay ass, and they couldn't fire him without being sued for discrimination. That's the only logical explanation why they'd employ someone like that.

He picked up the handset. A soothing dial tone buzzed in his ear.

It better work, Stephan, or you'll be getting a visit from me.

Glancing at the directory, he redialed the number. After a brief silence, a ring emanated from the earpiece.

You're lucky, Stephan.

The phone on the other end rang three times.

"Hello?" A raspy female voice answered.

"May I talk to Reverend Joshua Elijah Reynolds?"

"You'd like to speak with my husband Joshua?"

"If he's there. If he's not, do you know where I could reach him?"

"My husband's been dead for four years. May I ask who I'm speaking with?"

"My name's Harold Jenkins. I used to live in West Haven years ago, and I've come back to do some research for a project."

"Your name's not familiar. Were you a friend of Joshua's?"

"I didn't know him personally."

"Did you ever attend any of his services? He was a wonderful speaker. Other congregations were always asking him to hold services when their pastors were away."

"I'm afraid I never got to hear him speak."

"That's a shame. You would have loved his sermons. They were always so fiery, and he was such a strong man. He was always ready to sacrifice himself for others. The winter before he died, when we had that snowstorm that closed the roads for days, he

prepared meals for elderly members of the community, and he walked through the bitter cold to deliver them himself. Everyone was devastated when he passed away. It was so unexpected. He was out in the yard, cutting the grass, and he had a heart-attack. It took him instantly.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Like I give a shit. Just want to know what you saw one night 30 years ago. Don’t want to hear about old people who are too lazy to cook for themselves and expect some dumb bastard to slog through a blizzard to serve them.

“I’ve survived these past four years by praying. Never underestimate the power of prayer.” She paused. “How did you hear about Joshua?”

“I’d read some old articles from the Benjamin Examiner, and one of them mentioned your husband, so I wanted to interview him for my project.”

“Which articles were those? The ones about his work with the Holy Light Children’s Home? Joshua got lots of praise for that work, and the donations just poured right in after the newspaper told his story. He managed to buy the children a swing set, and he still had enough left over to buy all of them bibles.”

“That sounds interesting, but the articles I’d read were about the meteorite that flew over Benjamin and West Haven. The paper said your husband witnessed the event, and I realize he’s gone, but I was wondering if you might’ve been with him that night?”

Tell me something useful, you old bitch. Tell me you were there, tell me you saw it. Give me some good information.

“Look here, you rude young man. Just because Joshua was foolish enough to speak to some filthy reporter about something he thought he saw, don’t expect me to do the same. And if you ever call me again, I’ll have you arrested for harassment.”

A loud click resounded through the earpiece.

I’m rude? You hung up on me. Hope you die, you fucking hag.

Guess I’ll have to be a little more tactful. Don’t want people to think I’m a reporter. They’ll never talk to me then. How do I explain myself though? Can’t get much more simple than the truth. Used to live in West Haven, saw the thing just like everyone else, came back out of curiosity. Of course. If I was a reporter trying to get people to tell me what they saw, would probably use that same approach. So what should I do? If I tell the truth, people might think I’m a reporter. Maybe I should lie and say I’m a reporter. Try one of those reverse psychology tricks.

Wonder if any reporters have ever investigated the story? Wouldn’t be surprised if they did. Stories like this are always popular, in movies, TV shows, books. Shit. Why didn’t I think of that before? There are probably a couple of books out there about West

Haven's UFO. Could've just looked for those on the Internet and saved myself all this trouble.

It's too late now. I'm already here, so I might as well keep going.

Removing another photocopy from the stack, he glanced at the masthead: West Haven News Chronicle—Opinions. Chartreuse ink colored one column.

The editorial from a couple of days after the crash. It has the same sequence of events described in the other articles, but it takes a definitive stand on what the thing was. How did he phrase it?

A tally of the known events leads this writer to one simple, undeniable, perhaps frightening, conclusion: Whatever sped across the skies of Benjamin and West Haven two nights ago was beyond doubt an aircraft—an unidentified, manned aircraft.

Who wrote that? Ed Kappel, Staff Writer. That's who I should talk to. He's a reporter. He'll talk to anybody, and he actually suggested it was a UFO.

All right. He said it a little euphemistically, but the implication's clear. What else could an unidentified, manned aircraft be? He probably wasn't allowed to say unidentified flying object, so he phrased it in an acceptable way, and he never said who might be piloting the craft or where it came from or that it even could've flown through space. He just said it was a craft in the air. The guy's brilliant.

No wonder no one talked about it after that day. He probably scared the shit out of everyone with that editorial. It was easier and safer to just ignore the truth.

Hope he's home. He might be my only salvation.

He turned to the center of the directory.

Mo. Need to go forward. La. Ku. Ke. Kay. Here. Kappel. Only two Kappels. One Ed.

He dialed the number listed in the directory. The phone rang six times.

Shit. He must not be home.

"Hello, Kappel residence." A man's voice reverberated in the earpiece, each syllable punctuated by heavy panting.

"Hello. Ed Kappel? My name's Harold Jenkins, and I'll be honest with you. I'm calling because I'd like to ask you some questions about—"

"Before you go any further, I'm not Ed Kappel. I'm Tom, his son."

“I’m sorry. I heard the deep voice, and I assumed you were your father.”

“It’s okay. I’ve gotten used to it after 35 years.”

“I suppose you would. Is your father available?”

“No, he’s out getting a haircut, but he should be back soon. If you give me your number, I’ll have him call you when he gets back.” He paused. “If you don’t mind me asking, what do you want to talk to him about?”

Suppose I should just tell the truth. Maybe he’ll return the call sooner if he knows it’s about the UFO.

“I’m on a personal quest. I lived in West Haven years ago, and I came back because I’m interested in West Haven’s history. Actually, I’m interested in some recent history. I saw something in the skies over West Haven when I was a kid, and I know your father wrote for the West Haven News Chronicle, so I—”

“You’re calling about that damned editorial he wrote about the meteorite, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I—”

“If you’d taken the time to read more of dad’s articles, you’d know he recanted that ridiculous editorial two days later, but weirdoes like you don’t do any real research. You read one piece that isn’t even very good, and you want to harass and embarrass him because he made a mistake that fits your twisted agenda. Why don’t you just leave the poor man alone.”

“I’m not a weirdo, and I’m being serious. I used to live in West Haven. My mother’s—”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about you or your mother, and if you had lived in this town, you’d know what kind of misery dad suffered because of that editorial. He almost lost his job and his sanity over some meaningless words because people like you harassed and ridiculed him. Just go back to wherever you came from and fuck off.”

A harsh click echoed through the earpiece.

You’re the one who needs to fuck off. He recanted his story. How was I supposed to know that? Fucking wimp. He can’t even stand behind his own words. Glad I didn’t waste my time with his sorry ass.

It looks like this is going to be more difficult than I thought. What was I expecting though? Booked the room for six days. Obviously knew it would take a while to tracking down witnesses, get interviews, get details, visit the site. Still. Didn’t think I’d run into all these dead leads. People who moved, people who died, people who don’t want to talk or want to act like it never happened. Wonder why people are so scared? It’s not like any of them saw what I saw that night. If they did, maybe they’d have a reason to be

terrified.

Now what should I do?

He stared at the photocopies lying on the table. He pushed the editorial page of the West Haven News Chronicle to the side, exposing an article from an unidentified newspaper. He studied a fuzzy photograph in the lower corner of the page.

Recognize that guy from somewhere, but the picture's so blurry I can't see him clearly. What's the caption say?

Grocery owner James Foster points to the sky, showing the path taken by the meteorite in its pass over West Haven

The guy who owns Foster's Market. Mother introduced me to him once. Doubt he'd remember me, but he might remember her. If he does, he'll know I'm not a reporter or a weirdo. He might actually talk to me or maybe give me the names of some people who'd be willing to talk to me. Especially if he vouches for me. Wonder if he's working today?

He flipped to the directory's business section.

Guess I'll look under grocery stores. Where I am? Diaper services. Haven't needed that since Georgie was toilet trained. Fireplace installation. Gas stations. Grocery equipment suppliers. Grocery stores. Food Mania Stores. Foster's Food Emporium. Foster's Market. Foster's Supermarket. Wonder which one I want? Addlington Mall. That's not it. East Pioneer Concourse? Might be it. Southern Meadows Mall. Have no idea where that is. Guess I want the store on East Pioneer Concourse.

He dialed the number.

A young woman answered after four rings. "Foster's Market."

"Is this the store on Pioneer Concourse?"

"Yeah, we're right beside the Clellan Bridge. You can't miss us."

"Is Mr. Foster working today?"

"He's here now, but he's in the stockroom. I can page him if it's really important."

"No, that's all right. I'll just stop by and see him."

He hung up.

What a snippy bitch, giving me attitude. It's not my fault she has a white trash job at a grocery store. If she's unhappy with it, she should find a real job.

Just glad Foster's there today. Maybe I'll finally start learning more than what the papers were willing to say or were allowed to say.

He went to the door. After checking his pocket for the room keycard, he stepped outside.

Shit. Forgot how hot it is out here. At least the air conditioner works well. It cooled the room in no time. Almost wish I didn't have to leave, but I don't have much choice.

He walked along the balcony, his hand skimming the aluminum railing. A cloudless sky softened by haze extended toward the western horizon, the muted sunlight reflecting off the cars in the parking lot.

It looks like a nice afternoon. Wonder if I should walk to Foster's? It's pretty hot out here, but it's not that far, probably eight or nine blocks, certainly not more than 10. It would give me a chance to see how West Haven's changed, and it would help me navigate better. Might even find important things, like restaurants. I'll walk. It should be fun.

As he reached the bottom of the staircase, an older couple wearing colorful floral shirts and baggy Bermuda shorts entered the breezeway.

Tourists, and they're actually staying here. It's reassuring to know this place isn't some slimy sex pit. Can just hear what Gina would've said if I told her I was staying in some brothel. She probably would've teased me about participating. Like I'd pay for sex. Might as well just pay someone to inject me herpes or AIDS.

From the parking lot, he turned right on Pioneer Concourse. Young maple trees and small flowerbeds placed at regular intervals sprouted from the grassy strip that separated the sidewalk from the street. On the far shore of the river, the roofs and steeples of Clellan protruded through the treetops, while a wooded hillside dominated the northern horizon. The fragrances of various wild flowers mingled in the air.

Don't remember West Haven being so scenic and peaceful.

He stepped onto a triangular island at the junction of three streets. An iron placard painted charcoal gray with ivory lettering stood in a flowerbed in the center of the island.

WEST HAVEN

Established as a Quaker retreat in 1768 on the former site of Fort Marseinne, used as a hospice during the Revolutionary War, officially declared a town in 1786, home of William Coulter, site of the nation's first commercial photography studio, birthplace of Finnley O'Brien, inventor of the dual spring-loaded door hinge.

Never knew this place had so much history. Remember teachers mentioning it in class, but never comprehended how old West Haven actually is. As a kid you lack the

perspective to appreciate time. You see the remains of the fort and think it was built a couple of summers ago. You don't realize the pile of rocks you're playing on used to be a building where soldiers and Indians fought and died two and a half centuries ago.

He studied the three streets that formed the island's sides.

Pioneer Concourse just follows the river to Foster's. The other two head into West Haven. The one to my right doesn't head in the right direction, but the one going straight should run parallel to Pioneer Concourse, just a block or two up from it. Think I'll go straight and see what's down that road.

He crossed the street, waves of moist heat spiraling up from the asphalt.

Wonder if I'll remember anything? Used to play all over West Haven. During the summer, when school was closed, mother would let us ride into work with her. We'd run around all day, and we'd meet her by the car when she was finished. Shit. Wish I could remember the name of that kid I used to play with. Certain I'd recognize it if I heard it.

The sidewalk passed beneath a row of tall elms, their gnarled roots jutting between its slate slabs.

It actually feels cooler in the shade. Thought that was just something old people said when they want to complain about the heat. Of course. Why would anyone believe anything old people say? All they ever do is complain about everything. It's like they create issues in their minds so they'll have something to bitch about. Think bitching gives them a sense of satisfaction.

Sweat trickled down his rib cage.

Damned heat. Hope I don't stain my shirt. Nothing more disgusting than seeing people with huge sweat stains under their arms.

Surprised I never noticed this heat when I lived in West Haven. We didn't have air conditioning, and we did everything outside. We ran through the fields, rode bikes, climbed trees. Of course. The heat doesn't seem to bother kids no matter what they do. Remember when Harry first learned to ride a bike. It was a hot, humid day like this. We'd given him the bike for his birthday, and it took nearly a month for him to get brave enough to take the training wheels off, but after a couple of falls, he caught on and rode all day. It was a blistering June day, but it didn't affect him. He didn't get dehydrated, he didn't get tired.

Wonder where that childhood energy goes? You get older, and you lose it. Especially after college. Then, washing the car strains you, cutting the grass exhausts you. Don't even mention shoveling snow out of the driveway.

As he passed a parterre between two Victorian houses, a glint of sunlight flashed in

the corner of his eye.

What?

Squinting through the reflected glare, he stared into the parterre. A shimmering brass sundial sat on a conical pedestal of green marble.

What a weird place for a sundial. Wouldn't think enough sun would shine on it. Who can read a sundial anyway? Wonder why it's there?

Entering the parterre, he followed a brick path through a flowerbed of variegated ivy. The bricks that surrounded the sundial alternated in color from rust to beige to cinnamon, forming a sunburst pattern around the pedestal. He read a polished brass plaque on the pedestal.

This sundial celebrates the lifetime achievements of Victor Amarettus, whose work in the field of cross-pollination remains a hallmark in botanical studies throughout the world, and who died on this spot in 1899 whilst tending the gardens he so loved.

Is this a joke? An entire garden dedicated to some loser who fucked flowers? How stupid. Wait. If I remember right, all of West Haven is like that. There's a statue or historic marker for every occasion. Yes. The statue of Willie Fogelbe, the fort, that sign for West Haven, this piece of shit. There were plenty more. Wish I could remember them. There are probably some pretty funny ones. Surprised they don't have a block dedicated to the famous outhouses of America. George Washington took a shit here. Abe Lincoln pissed on this spot. Ulysses S. Grant had the runs and accidentally wiped with the leaves of this poison ivy bush.

He glanced at the flowers spread along the path. A plastic dagger-shaped card protruded from a bed of geraniums.

Flowers planted, paid, and cared for by
the Amarettus Society of West Haven

West Haven gets goofier by the minute. Glad I forgot about this ridiculous shit. It would've been a deterrent to returning.

He continued through the parterre and turned right. Victorian houses with small yards enclosed in privet hedges faced the street, while black gas lamps lined the brick

sidewalks, their yellow and blue flames flickering inside thick glass globes.

Surprised I don't remember more about West Haven. The streets are so distinct and quaint. Guess I never noticed them as a kid.

Wonder how we managed to get around without getting lost? West Haven's much larger than I remember. Don't think we ventured outside a certain area. We stayed between the river and the common. Yes. Hardwick Common. We spent plenty of time there. Wonder where it is? Think it's just a couple of blocks ahead.

Two blocks later, he stopped on a corner beside a sprawling Victorian mansion that faced an immense park. Gravel paths led into park's interior, while the playful screams of children echoed among its trees and shrubs.

There's Hardwick Common. It's huge. Surprised we never got lost in there.

Speaking of lost. Wonder where I am in relation to Foster's? If I've been walking parallel to Pioneer Concourse, it should be that way.

He looked to his left. Several cars passed through an intersection at the end of a two-way street, sunlight flashing off their metallic bodies.

That should be Pioneer Concourse, and Foster's should be a couple of blocks to the right.

He walked toward the distant intersection. A gentle wind blew across the common, carrying the odor of freshly mown grass.

The breeze feels nice. It doesn't seem as hot as I thought it would. Not even sweating that much. At least there aren't any stains under my arms.

He sniffed his underarm.

And my deodorant's holding up.

Shit. Hope nobody saw that.

He glanced at the street.

There doesn't seem to be anyone around. Strange. See cars parked on the streets, see cars on the roads, but don't see many people walking around. It seems desolate, almost dead, but around that mall, there's so much traffic you can barely move. It doesn't make sense. Downtown's dead, but the outlying area's insanely busy.

When I lived in West Haven, downtown was the only center of activity. It was the only place for shopping, for school, for socializing. Remember people from other towns coming into West Haven, but it's completely empty now. The only people you see are kids and old people. There have to be more people in West Haven than the handful I've seen. Especially with all these houses and cars.

He arrived at an intersection with a four-lane boulevard. A median strip filled with tiger lilies and black-eyed Susan ran through its center. Across the boulevard, Quaker

Promenade stretched along the river, its lawn shaded by trees.

Pioneer Concourse. Just as I thought.

To his right, a narrow brick building loomed above the promenade, and beyond that, a red stone arch bridge spanned the river.

Believe that's the Clellan bridge. The snippy bitch said they were beside the bridge, so the store must be on the other side of it.

The white WALK signal began flashing, and he hurried across Pioneer Concourse.

It feels cooler by the promenade, probably because of the trees and river. There's a little bit of a breeze, too. It feels nice.

He watched a gray squirrel chase and a black one through the grass, their tails twitching as they ran. Making a quick U-turn, the squirrels scurried up a cherry tree with deeply furrowed bark. As he approached the narrow brick building at the end of the promenade, he heard muffled voices and the clinking of silverware on china emanating from a balcony that overlooked the river. The scent of grilling meat wafted along the breeze, overwhelming the faint stench of algae from the river.

It must be a restaurant, and it smells damned good. Wonder what it's called?

He glanced at a wooden plaque above the door.

Cresset House Bistro. It seems romantic. Especially if you sit on the balcony out back. Wish I could bring Gina here. She'd like the outdoor seating. Wonder what the food's like?

A menu printed on coarse beige paper hung inside a walnut frame centered beneath a pewter cresset with a flame-shaped light bulb.

Omelets, sausage, pancakes, waffles, crepes. That works for breakfast. Could do without the crepes. Would rather have pancakes. They're simple and filling. Croissant sandwiches, open-faced sandwiches, soups, salads. Their lunch isn't the most appetizing. They need to serve a good burger. What's life without American cuisine? Steaks, chicken, pasta, salads. The dinners sound better. Like the thought of a juicy steak with mashed potatoes. That's a meal. Raspberry liqueur cake, triple chocolate torte, cappuccino. The desserts are passable. Except for the cappuccino. Wouldn't call that dessert. It's just coffee-flavored muddy water.

Maybe it's not the best place to bring Gina. She'd like it, but I'm not certain I would. Of course. It doesn't matter since I'm not going to see her while I'm in West Haven. Won't see her until I get home. That's a depressing thought. I'm going to miss her. Have seen her almost every day for the last 11 months

Can't believe it's been that long. It seems like one long glorious dream. Wonder why did it took so long to happen? No. The question is. How soon will it end? Probably

pretty soon. Now that's truly depressing. Don't even want to think about what will happen then.

He continued walking east. The foundation of Fort Marseinne covered a lawn between the Cresset House Bistro and the Clellan bridge, its black boulders forming a rudimentary pentagon in the grass. A block of polished russet granite, taller than the foundation, stood in the center of the pentagon.

That brown rock looks different, like it doesn't belong. Wait. There used to be something on that rock. A soldier, with a rifle. He had the rifle raised to his shoulder like he was shooting something. Yes. It was a monument honoring the soldiers who died defending the fort against an Indian attack, and there was a sign at the soldier's feet. It said something about the soldiers clearing the path for the Quakers who founded West Haven.

Know why I remember that so clearly. We used to climb on the soldier and swing from his rifle. We only did that when no one was around. We would've gotten in trouble if any adults had seen us. And on the Fourth, we used to climb on the base to watch the fireworks. We could see above everyone's heads. Surprised we did that. Wouldn't even think of climbing on a monument now. Would feel like I was desecrating it and the memory of whatever it stood for. Suppose we didn't care. We were just a couple of kids who didn't know anything about honor or pride or the sacrifices of others.

He entered the parking lot of Foster's Market. The white and yellow markings for the parking spaces and aisles glimmered against the freshly lain asphalt, while shimmering waves of heat created watery mirages across the black surface.

The old store was dinky compared to this monster. It was probably a third this size, and the aisles were so narrow you couldn't use shopping carts. You had to use those hand-baskets.

The market's pneumatic doors opened, and a cool draft escaped from inside.

That feels wonderful on a hot day. Glad we have air conditioning to make life tolerable.

As he entered the store, the sudden chill sent goose bumps across his arms and legs. His nipples hardened and rubbed against the rough fabric of his polo shirt.

Shit. There's nothing tolerable about this. Are they trying to keep the ice cream from melting in people's shopping carts?

He stared at the checkout counters.

There's the office, behind the cash registers. Shit. It's so fucking cold in here, if this wasn't the first good lead I've had, I'd leave. How do they expect people to shop in this cold? How do they expect people to work? No wonder that girl on the phone was so

bitchy. Of course. If you choose a loser job, you deserve whatever shitty working conditions you get.

He passed a display of charcoal briquettes and walked behind the checkout counters, weaving among shoppers who pushed carts of groceries.

What a zoo. Can't believe mother worked in a place like this, serving grumpy old people and bitchy mothers with too many kids. Wonder why she did it? Whatever the reason, she certainly deserved to work a shit job, and she deserved all the agony it gave her. Wish I would've known enough as a kid to enjoy watching her suffer.

At the office, he stepped in line behind an old woman with a pink crocheted shawl draped across her shoulders.

There's a smart woman, dressed appropriately for the cold. She must shop here enough to know it's always freezing.

Wish there was some way to keep warm. It's worse than being outside in winter.

The woman in the shawl went to the counter and asked for 10 lottery tickets.

Great. She lives on a fixed income but throws her money away on lottery tickets, and she probably complains about never having enough money to pay the bills and buy groceries.

After the woman left, he stepped forward, his shoulders level with the counter.

"Can I help you?" A young woman with curly red hair and glasses peered at him. A yellow sweater hung around her shoulders, its knotted sleeves resting on her chest.

"I'd like to speak with Mr. Foster."

"You filing a customer complaint, or are you a sales rep?"

"Neither. I'd just like to talk to him." Recognize that voice. She's the snippy bitch from the phone. At least she's a little more attractive than her voice sounds.

"About what?"

"It's something personal."

"Okay." She sighed. "He's on the receiving dock. I'll have to page him." She removed a telephone from the wall and mumbled into the mouthpiece. As she hung up, she looked at Harold. "He'll be here in a minute."

"Thank you." He smiled and moved to the side.

Stupid redheaded bitch. Don't give me attitude just because you're miserable. If you're unhappy with your job, quit. She probably has a big fat ass to go with that ugly face.

He glanced down an aisle lined with opened freezers. A small boy in a bright red t-shirt ran across the rear of the store. A thin woman with straight black hair chased after him.

Wonder what Mr. Foster looks like? He must be pushing 80. Actually. Surprised he's still here. He probably can't give up the business. If he did, he'd probably just sit at home bored and pester his wife. She probably sends him here every day just to get rid of him.

A middle-aged man wearing a brown checkered tie and a navy smock hurried to the office. He called to the young woman behind the counter, and she pointed at Harold.

The man walked toward Harold. "Hi, I'm Kent Foster. You wanted to speak with me?"

He's not the right Foster. He must be the son.

"Actually, I was hoping to speak to the Mr. Foster who ran the store about 30 years ago."

"That would be my Uncle Jim, but he left the business 15 or 16 years back. He got tired of working and wanted to enjoy his money, so he sold the business to my father." He grinned. "You know. You're the first person in years who's come in here looking for Uncle Jim."

"I had no idea he retired. The last time I was in West Haven, the old store was still here."

Now what should I do?

"That explains it. Dad built this store not too long after he bought the business."

"I see." That's not the information I need. "Could you give me your uncle's number? I could probably speak to him over the phone."

"I'm sure Uncle Jim wouldn't mind, but he's not home right now. He left yesterday morning for an Alaskan cruise and won't be back for three weeks."

"That doesn't do me any good."

"Maybe I could help. What did you want to talk to him about?"

"I lived in West Haven for a couple of years when I was growing up, and I saw the meteorite that flew over West Haven. It crashed pretty close to where we lived."

Kent's eyebrows furrowed. "What's this have to do with Uncle Jim?"

"Nothing directly. I came back to West Haven because I'm curious about some things I'd seen that night. Before I drove here, I did some research, and I ran across an old newspaper article with your uncle's picture in it. I thought since my mother used to work for him, he might be willing to talk to me about what he remembers from that night, or maybe he could give me the names of some people I could talk to."

"Your mother worked for Uncle Jim? He'd love to talk to you about that. He likes to hear what happened to his old employees. I'm sure he'd remember your mother. He has a good, reliable memory."

“Do you think he remembers anything about the night the meteorite crashed?”

“I’m sure he does.” Kent glanced at the floor. “I really wish I could help you, but I don’t think I can. When I was younger, I overheard Uncle Jim talking to my father about the meteor. He didn’t say much. He mostly complained about people making fun of him because of what he told the paper. He regretted talking publicly about the meteor back then, so I really don’t think he’d be willing to talk to you or anyone else about it now.”

“That seems to be the standard response from everyone.” Stupid fucking hicks. Will never find out what I want to know.

“Not everyone’s like that. I know one person who’d be happy to talk to you.”

“Who?”

“Leo Everly. He’s a local historian and a professor at the community college. He’s been the president of the West Haven Historical Society for years, and he knows everything there is to know about this town. I’ve heard he knows more about the meteor than anyone else.”

“Where can I find this Leo Everly?” He knows more than anyone else? Wonder if he believes it was a UFO?

“Try the Historical Society first, and if he’s not there, he might be at the community college, but since it’s summer, I don’t think he’ll be there.”

“Great. What’s the quickest way to the Historical Society?”

“Head up Blanchard Street until you get to Hardwick Common. At the common, hang a left, go four blocks, and it’s on the corner. There should be a sign for it.”

“Make a left at the common, go four blocks. That’s simple. Which street is Blanchard?”

“It’s the one right up from the fort.”

“Great. Thank you very much, Mr. Foster.” Harold shook his hand.

“I wish I could have been more helpful.”

“You pointed me the right direction. That’s exactly what I needed.”

As Harold began walking toward the checkout counters, he heard the voice of the redheaded woman in the office.

Did that bitch just call Kent over? She did. She probably wants to know why I wanted to talk to him so she could find out what my personal matter was. If it was your business, would’ve told you. Nosy cunt. Not everyone in West Haven needs to know why I’m here.

He shivered.

Shit. It’s freezing in here. My skin actually aches from the cold. Surprised I’m not turning blue. Should’ve told Kent to turn up the heat. The little bastard. He doesn’t think

Uncle Jim would be willing to talk to me about the UFO, but he'd remember my mother. What shit. He was just trying to avoid my question.

Wonder how he managed to become the manager anyway? He certainly doesn't seem like manager material. He probably got the job from his father. Otherwise, he'd probably be working at the mall, selling worthless shit with all the other losers. These damn retail people. They need to get real jobs with real salaries.

He hurried through the pneumatic doors. Outside, his skin began tingling in the humid summer heat.

This feels wonderful. Wish I could just stand here and soak up the heat, but I can't. Have to find this Leo Everly guy. He seems like a pretty good lead. If anyone knows the truth, it would be a local historian.

Wonder if he has access to information other people don't know about? He might. Being a professor and the president of the Historical Society, he's probably aware of the Freedom of Information Act. Wonder if he used it to get classified documents concerning the UFO? That would be great if he did.

He crossed the street that led to the Clellan bridge.

Stupid Foster. Leo Everly might not be at the college because it's summer. He'd be there if he's teaching summer classes. It doesn't shut down during summer like high school, but Foster probably doesn't know that because he probably never went to college.

There's Blanchard, on the other side of the concourse.

He looked at the remains of Fort Marseinne's foundation. A dull glare reflected off the block of polished russet granite.

Wonder what happened to the statue of that soldier? Can't see why they'd tear down a memorial celebrating something like that, unless it was cracked or damaged.

He crossed to the landscaped median in the center of Pioneer Concourse. A minivan in the eastbound lane sped by, his distorted reflection flashing across its side.

That guy's going pretty fast for a city street. It's a good thing I was paying attention. If I'd stepped in front him, he wouldn't have been able to stop. Of course. If he'd hit me, could've sued him and gotten rich, but that wouldn't have done anything to fix my personal life, and I couldn't have enjoyed the money if I was permanently disabled.

Young crape myrtles with plush foliage sprouted from the small gardens of the narrow brownstones on Blanchard Street.

All these homes have been turned into offices. Funny. They're all lawyers on that side of the street, and all doctors and dentists on this side. Guess if your doctor screws up, you just run across the street, find a lawyer, and sue the doctor. Of course. If that

actually happened, the parties wouldn't be able to avoid each other. They'd look across the street and see the opposition.

A grand Colonial house occupied a corner lot, its whitewashed facade gleaming in the sunlight. A short brick wall with iron paling surrounded its flowered gardens, while a vine-covered arbor led to the lawns behind the house. A name appeared on an embossed brass plaque beside the gate: CAPTAIN EAGLEHORN'S BED AND BOARD.

It looks nice, but it's probably expensive. Wonder if their restaurant's open to the public? Stephan might know, or I could check the phonebook. Might try this place one night, if I can eat here without being a guest.

A better idea would be to bring Gina here for my birthday. We could celebrate our anniversary together. Wonder if that's possible? It might look suspicious if both of us were gone at exactly the same time. Doubt anyone in the office would suspect anything. They'd just think it's a coincidence. Especially since no one knows about us.

Suppose the office isn't what I should be concerned about. Should be concerned about Wendy. But why should I be concerned about her? She already knows about Gina and me, and she's disappeared with the kids. Have no idea where she went or what she's doing. Not even certain if she'll return.

Have Gina to consider, too. Not entirely certain what she thinks about all this. She might not think we have anything to celebrate. Would rather not think about that.

The squeal of rubber on pavement resonated along Blanchard Street, followed by a bang and the tinny crunching of metal.

He peered over his shoulder. A faded red pickup and a metallic gold sedan sat in the intersection of Pioneer Concourse and Blanchard Street, their front ends jammed together. Glittering pieces of glass littered the pavement, and a fine plume of steam rose from the sedan's crinkled hood.

Shit. I just walked through there.

His body thumped against a solid object.

Shit. Just ran into someone.

He turned forward. "I'm sorry. I wasn't watching—" He paused. "What?"

He stared into a rough bronze face framed beneath a bronze hat with a wide curled brim.

It's another one of those fucking statues, right in the middle of the fucking sidewalk.

Shit. Wonder if anyone saw me talking to it?

He glanced at the street.

Good. No one's around. Don't want them to think I'm totally crazy. Show up and start asking about UFOs and talking to statues. They might have me committed.

Wait. Don't remember this hideous thing. Would definitely remember a giant chunk of metal in the middle of the sidewalk.

He studied the bulky human shape formed from irregular bronze spalls. The polished bumps and ridges of the uneven surface glistened in the sun, while a grimy patina filled the crevices between the spalls. The figure stood on the curb, holding a metal book in the air.

Never seen anything so hideous. It looks like it was made from chunks of scrap, like it could've been made from the pieces of another statue someone broke apart with a sledge hammer and glued back together in a different way to make this thing.

It's so fucking ugly I can't even tell if it's a man or a woman. It seems to be in a dress. Wait. What's that?

A prism-shaped bronze placard nestled against the statue's base.

Constance Wollman
World War I volunteer nurse, wounded during a mercy mission in 1917, saver of lives, suffragette, early advocate of women's and children's rights

It is a woman. It must be close to life-size.

Stepping off the curb, he stood in front of the statue, his eyes level with its patina encrusted eyes. A pointed nose composed of small bronze spalls jutted between the pitted cheeks and the angular chin. An amorphous ankle-length dress that featured scalloped folds of twisted spalls covered the statue's thin torso.

Hope she didn't look like this in real life. If she did, she would've been ugly enough to make a constipated dog shit. Wonder why they'd make something like this? There's nothing artistic about it. They didn't even use artistic license to make her attractive. If they had, the garbage men wouldn't be likely to mistake it for some scrap metal left out for disposal.

Wonder if anyone even cares about this ugly bitch? Doubt it. Not like she did anything useful or meaningful. Wonder why it's on this spot? Did she die here? Did she use to live here? Did she have her period here? This is the stupidest statue I've ever seen.

It's optical pollution. Need to beautify this piece of trash.

After checking the street for other pedestrians, he picked a half-smoked cigarette from the brick sidewalk. Pinching the lipstick-smeared filter, he jammed it between the statue's lips and angled the ashen tip toward the ground.

She looks more natural now. Actually. She looks more like a man, but she's uglier

than most men I know. Wish I had a cucumber and two plums. Would give her the proper anatomy. Wouldn't be surprised if Constance was an ugly lesbian dyke. Constance. She probably constantly had hair between her teeth.

He began walking south. Blanchard Street terminated at an intersection with Winnowers Lane. He studied the large wooded lawn across the street.

There's Hardwick Common.

He looked to his left. The common stretched along Winnowers Lane for two blocks, its distant boundary marked by a row of brownstones. The lane continued beyond the brownstones, into eastern West Haven.

Foster's such a stupid idiot. Could've taken the street straight up from the store. Didn't have to backtrack to the fort. Went three or four blocks out of my way, and started to sweat from all the walking. Can't believe I wasted all that time.

He stared at the sidewalk on the northern side of Winnowers Lane, the tiny dots of silicate embedded in its white surface sparkling in the sun.

This doesn't resemble the rest of the sidewalks in West Haven. There are no trees, no grass, no shade. It's just buildings and sidewalk and sun and heat.

He glanced at sidewalk bordering Hardwick Common.

That's more appealing. A cool shaded sidewalk and plenty of greenery.

As he crossed Winnowers Lane, he studied the common.

Never realized how massive this place is. It must be five or six blocks long. No wonder we liked to play here. It must've seemed like the entire world was our playground, and with all the swings and slides and fields, it's a kid's paradise. Remember there was a tank and a cannon near one of the entrances. We used to love climbing on them. Wonder if they're still here?

He peered in the common.

Can't see that much, not with all the trees and shrubs, and the tank and cannon could be anywhere. Don't remember the park being so overgrown. It was more open, with more room to play. At least it seemed like that. Maybe we didn't need as much space because we were small.

Shouting and laughter filled the air.

It sounds like a ball game or something. It's good to know kids still play outside. Thought they spent all their time inside, playing video games or surfing the Internet. It sounds like they're somewhere nearby. Maybe I'll stop and watch for a while.

He saw an iron park bench facing Winnowers Lane. An elderly man sat on the bench, staring into Hardwick Common, one knee on the bench's seat, an elbow on its top rail.

He must be able to see the game from there. It must be pretty wild for him to be watching so intently. It sounds like older kids. Maybe they're playing soccer or lacrosse.

Stopping beside the park bench, Harold glanced at the source of the noise.

What the fuck?

A late middle-aged man dressed in a gray three-piece suit walked along a gravel path toward the street, his faint shadow preceding him. He held an open book in his hand, reading. Five teenagers wearing bulky black leather jackets, loose-fitting camouflage pants, and scuffed army boots swarmed around him. Their shaved heads glistened with perspiration.

A young man with geometric tattoos that scrolled up his neck and around his skull kicked the air behind the man's back. "Where you running to, you cock-sucking sack of shit?"

A teenager to the man's side punched the air near him. "Yeah, you black asshole. Stop running from us."

"Look at us when we're talking to you." Another teenager grabbed a clump of dry cut grass from the ground and threw it at him. "Look at us, you fucking nigger."

Without stopping or raising his head, the man brushed a few blades of grass from the pages of the book.

Harold stared at them. "What the hell's going on?"

The elderly man sitting on the bench turned around. "I didn't know you were back there."

He looked at the elderly man. "What the hell are they doing?"

"Not something you'd expect to see in a quiet place like this, is it?" He wore a powder blue short-sleeve polyester shirt with brown polyester trousers. A folded tweed jacket sat on the bench beside him, while a matching homburg rested on the jacket.

"I wouldn't expect to see that anywhere."

"No, most folk wouldn't." He studied Harold's face. "Why don't you sit in the shade here and rest? You look hot and tired." He lifted the jacket and hat from the bench.

"That's a good idea." Harold sat beside him. "And maybe you can explain why are those kids harassing that black man? Is he a drug dealer or a pimp?"

The elderly man laughed. "No, no, those kids belong to Rudi Waldegradt's group, and they're just baiting Leo like they always do. They get on the little spook every chance they can, but they get on everyone like that."

"Leo?"

"Leo Everly."

"The same Leo Everly who's president of the West Haven Historical Society?"

“We only have one Leo Everly in this town.”

“I didn’t know. I wasn’t aware that—”

“That he was a negro?”

“No. I mean. Yes.”

The man shifted on the bench and faced Harold. “And he’s an uppity little negro. I don’t condone those kids’ behavior. They act like a troop of chimpanzees reacting to their own reflections. But someone needs to shove that little negro back in his place since all he does is cause problems and tell us we’re not decent folk.”

“What makes him think the people in West Haven aren’t decent?”

“According to Leo, the town does nothing to promote cultural awareness. That’s his word, cultural awareness. I suspect it’s something he made up.”

“What’s cultural awareness?”

“That’s what we all asked. That little negro’s been railing about it for 15 years, and we still don’t know what he’s talking about. It all started with the statue of Captain Billiere.”

“Which one’s Billiere?”

“He used to be at the fort. Captain Billiere stood there proudly with his rifle, defending the fort against the red savages.”

“I remember that statue. What did Leo Everly have to do with it disappearing?”

“About 15 years ago, not long after he helped found the Historical Society, he raised a big stink by saying it was an insult to the tribes who used to live here. He wanted to tear the captain down and put up a monument to the native peoples whose land the white man stole. Those were his words, too, the native peoples and the white man. He made it sound like all us whites did something wrong, as if there aren’t any negroes living here, polluting the place.”

“Someone must’ve listened to him because the statue’s gone.”

“It’s not really gone.” The elderly man chuckled. “When Leo started his campaign to tear down the statue, no one on city council paid attention to him. They just thought he was a crazy negro who had worked in the sun too long. They said that because years ago, he used to work at Sculden’s Nursery, and he spent his days outside shoveling manure, which is where he should have stayed. But about a week after Leo started his cultural awareness crusade, the Carnelli girl killed herself because she got pregnant and couldn’t tell her parents about it.”

“How’s that connected to the statue?”

“I’m getting there, young fellow.” He straightened himself on the bench, his stomach resting on his thighs. “Like I was saying, the poor girl couldn’t say anything to her

parents. Vince and Rosa are good people, but they're religious, and they didn't like who their daughter was seeing, the Menasheim boy. He was one of those snotty Jews, and since he wasn't Italian or Catholic, her parents wouldn't have let her marry him, no matter what the circumstances.

"And being true and devout, she would have wanted to keep the baby, but she only could have kept it if she had it out of wedlock. But the church never would have approved of that, and it would have caused a major scandal since Vince was a member of the parish council.

"The girl was in a serious dilemma. She was already causing her parents unbelievable heartache by dating a Jew, and knowing their daughter was pregnant by a Jew would have devastated them. Now, the girl didn't leave a note explaining herself, but the only thing we could figure out is the thought of disgracing her family drove her crazy, and in her confused state, she hung herself from the barrel of Billiere's rifle. Some school children on a fieldtrip found her the next morning."

Harold wiped the perspiration from his temple. "What happened to the statue?"

"They took it down the same day they found the Carnelli girl. They called in a wrecker right after they called the coroner. The block and tackle was set up before the ambulance even pulled away."

"So Leo didn't actually force them to remove it."

"You and I understand that, but you couldn't tell that little negro that. You would have thought he had torn it down all by himself. He didn't even care that some poor white girl and her unborn baby lost their lives over it."

"I hope they never built his native peoples monument."

"We're real Americans in this town. We wouldn't erect a memorial to savages. It would dishonor the memory of every soldier who lost his life building this great country."

"So what did Leo do?"

"Once he realized we weren't about to let him put something like that by the fort, he fabricated some other cause to show us how we lacked cultural awareness."

"From what I've seen, West Haven already has a statue or monument for every important person or event you can think of. What other cause is left?"

"I like the way you think, young fellow." The elderly man patted Harold's knee. "We all thought we had something to honor every historical person and event in town, but not Leo. He said there's more heritage and culture here than just a Eurocentric one. That was another of his fancy words, Eurocentric. And he set out on a lifelong crusade to prove us white folk wrong."

“The little negro keeps reading his books and poking his face into dusty old records in city hall looking for ways to embarrass us whites. Every time he finds something, he turns it into a self-righteous cause and petitions city council to have it officially recognized as something of historical significance. That’s another of his made up words, historical significance.

“He recently claimed he found evidence that West Haven was a stop on the Underground Railroad, and he wanted to excavate the fruit cellar of an abandoned farmhouse east of here to prove it. And he tried to stop them from building the 180 bypass because it supposedly passed through an Indian burial ground north of Clellan. He said it violated sacred Indian ground, as if such a thing could even exist. Then, a few summers back, he wanted the city limits signs revised to include something about the first Black Americans’ Blacksmith Guild, which Leo said was organized here during the Civil War. He felt it should be mentioned beside Finnley O’Brien and his door hinge. Can you believe that bull?”

Harold snorted. “What else would you expect from a radical black? He probably thinks he should receive some sort of compensation because his ancestors were slaves and he’s had to face a lifetime of inequality because of it.”

“If Leo ever suggested that, Rudi Waldegradt and his group would lynch him from the nearest lamppost before the words could echo off the hills.”

That reminds me.

Harold peered over his shoulder.

No one there.

He glanced down Winnowers Lane.

Don’t see those kids, but there’s Leo.

In the distance, Leo Everly walked along the opposite side of the street, reading his book. As he passed a row of brownstones, the trees on Winnowers Lane obscured him from sight.

Harold settled onto the bench. “What happened to those kids who were harassing Leo? They’re gone, and he’s walking along like nothing ever happened. It doesn’t make sense.”

“That group never makes sense. They act without reason or restraint, and you never know who they will go after next.”

“They just attack people randomly?”

“No, they usually focus on people they think are ruining town.”

“Ruining West Haven? How could Leo be ruining West Haven?” He angled his body toward the elderly man.

“I wouldn’t say he’s ruining town, but he does some things that make it uncomfortable for decent white folk to live here, and his latest project has P.O.ed a lot of us.”

“What’s he working on?”

“I was about to tell you, young fellow.” He pulled his feet under the bench and crossed his ankles. “The story going around is Leo’s wants to build an African American Cultural Heritage Center on the community college grounds. From what I understand, he has proof there was once a town built by freed slaves on the spot where the college is. This town was supposedly leveled at the turn of the century during a typhoid epidemic, and I heard they had found some remains of the buildings when they were digging the foundations for the campus buildings, but they didn’t tell anyone since they didn’t want to delay construction.

“Leo somehow found out about this story and decided this freed-slave town should be recognized for some reason or other. He feels we should make restitution to the past. He used those words during a meeting of the college’s board of directors, and I heard his idea of making restitution to the past is taking over half the college grounds and building an African American Cultural Heritage Center.”

Harold laughed. “There isn’t any African American cultural heritage.”

“We all know that, but the little negro doesn’t care.” He tapped Harold’s thigh with his fingers. “And do you know what Leo’s idea of cultural heritage is? He wants to create an African village on the college grounds, complete with straw huts and naked negroes running around with spears. I heard he’s trying to secure a permit to bring in lions, giraffes, and other African animals for this heritage center.”

“What’s the point of building something so stupid?”

“He wants to teach all the young negroes of the community about their heritage, and that’s the only heritage he can find. But they already have an American heritage. I don’t understand why that’s not good enough for them.”

“Because they don’t consider themselves Americans.”

“And they never will as long as they have folks like Leo Everly telling them they should be living naked in huts with wild animals.” The elderly man shook his head. “I might not agree with the tactics Rudi and his group employ, but I sure hope they give that uppity little negro the fright of his life. They don’t need to chase him out of town, just persuade him to change his mind about this heritage center.”

“Why does he even stay in West Haven? He’s obviously not wanted.”

“He’s appointed himself the town gadfly. He believes it’s his duty to belittle and shame decent folk, and he thinks we’re the ones who need to improve.”

“That sounds hypocritical to me.”

“Little negroes like him always are.”

“Does anyone in West Haven listen to him?”

“Not as far as I know, but for some reason, he seems to be well respected at the college, and from what I heard, the Historical Society is doing well. What I don’t understand is why the city council sometimes gets foolish and gives in to the little negro, like when they agreed to build that unsightly Constance Wollman statue.”

“Do you mean that thing on Blanchard Street that looks like a man in a dress?”

He smiled at Harold. “I believe you have seen it.”

“Leo’s responsible for that monstrosity?”

Hope he walks past it and sees the cigarette I stuffed in that bronze cunt.

“He sure is, and do you know what the biggest kick in the backside is? That little negro convinced the council to melt down Captain Billiere’s statue to make it. He said it was cheaper to recycle old bronze than to buy new bronze. I heard the council had to do what he wanted because he had information on a parking meter scam one of them was running. The dirty negro said he would only keep quiet if they paid for the Wollman statue. They supposedly didn’t have any choice, and they decided to recycle Captain Billiere to save money. So the little negro still managed to have the captain completely erased from the town’s history.”

“No wonder I never trust those people.”

Makes me hope Leo doesn’t see the cigarette. He’d probably just take it out. Rather have everyone else see what I did to that stupid, ugly piece of lesbian shit.

“No one could blame you for feeling that way about them folk, and Leo Everly is one of the slyest negroes you’ll ever find.” Sliding to the end of the bench, the elderly man rested a knee on its wooden seat. “Did you have any business at the Historical Society?”

“I did, but I changed my mind after talking to you.”

“Maybe I can help you. What you were hoping to find?”

“I suppose it can’t hurt to tell you.” Harold inhaled the scent of mown grass. “I lived in West Haven for five or six years when I was a kid. We moved away about 25 years ago or so.”

“25 years ago? What’s your name young fellow?”

“Jenkins. Harold Jenkins.”

“Jenkins? I feel like I know that name.” He paused. “What did your dad do?”

“I honestly don’t know. My father died before we moved to West Haven, when I was only three or four. I don’t remember anything about him.”

“Who brought you here?”

“My mother.”

“Did she have a job, or did you live with relatives?”

“She worked at Foster’s Market, at the old store.”

The man remained silent for a moment. “Madeline Jenkins. Maddie. Right?”

“That’s my mother, but I’ve never heard anyone call her Maddie.”

Shit. Why did I bump into someone who knew the bitch? Just hope he didn’t know her well enough that he’ll ask many questions about her. Don’t want to talk about her.

“I’m surprised. We all knew her as Maddie.”

“We who?”

“Everyone who knew her.”

“How did you know my mother?”

“I met Maddie through my wife. They worked at the store together. Maybe you met my wife. She worked in the produce department.”

“What’s her name?”

“Ruth Padalovich.” The man frowned. “I apologize. I didn’t introduce myself. The name’s George Padalovich.” He shook Harold’s hand.

“Nice to meet you, George, but I don’t think I met your wife. I rarely went into Foster’s, except to see my mother.”

“Ruth was always there early in the mornings. You were probably in school during her shift, so you probably never got to meet her. But we all called your mother Maddie. I had met her on a number of occasions, once or twice in the store and a few times outside it.” He focused on Harold’s face. “Did you know she was close to one of my friends?”

“I honestly don’t know. Who’s your friend?”

“Tom Eriksson. He’s a small man for a Swede. He had thin blond hair back then, and he had clear, ice-blue eyes with crow’s feet. I’m surprised you don’t remember him because I had the impression he saw your mother a good bit.”

Shit. Don’t like where this conversation’s heading. Like I remember his fucking friend. Wait. Remember a guy who brought us vegetables. Wonder?

“I do remember someone named Tom. He used to bring us vegetables from his farm. I think he came over during the afternoons when I was at school or playing outside. Did he own an antique dark blue pickup? I can remember seeing a pickup with bubbled quarter panels and round headlights in the front yard.”

“Yeah, Tom owned an old Hillary back then. I kept telling him to trade it in, but he drove it until the engine gave out, and then, he couldn’t get anything for that piece of junk.” He smiled at Harold. “Do you remember a lot about your life here?”

“Probably not as much as I should.”

Don't like that look. Wonder what he's thinking about?

"You know, Tom and I have been friends since high school, and we have talked about a lot of things over those years, but one thing we could never figure out is what happened to your mother. She was friendly with everyone. I liked her the few times I met her. But she shocked us all when she just vanished. It was especially hard on Tom. She didn't say goodbye. She never called to give any explanation. She didn't even take all of her belongs from the house. What happened to her?"

Fuck. Can't explain the bitch to myself. Certainly can't explain her to this old fuck and his dumbass friend.

"Nothing happened. She just went to live with her parents."

"Did she ever try to contact anyone from town after she left?"

"I honestly couldn't tell you. I was only 10 or 11 at the time, and I didn't know anything about my mother's personal life."

Know enough about her personal life to know I don't want to know anymore.

"I suppose you didn't, but it seems so unnatural she would desert all her friends and acquaintances without saying anything to anyone."

You obviously didn't know her that well, but unnatural is a good description for her.

"If you want to know the truth, she didn't even tell me we were moving. She just packed me into the car in the middle of the night while I was still asleep, and I woke up on my grandparents' doorstep the next morning."

"That explains what happened to Maddie, but it doesn't really explain why she acted how she did." He glanced at Harold. "Did you know Tom wanted to involve the police? It's a good thing I stopped him. He would have made a fool of himself in front of the whole town. I guess some things are best left untouched." George kicked a clump of grass on the ground. "What do you think of town today, Harold? Is it anything like you remember?"

Glad he changed the topic. Didn't want to talk about her anymore. It's not my fault she's a bitch and left without telling anyone.

"I remember some things, like the river and the common, but other things are completely alien. This morning, I drove down Addlington Avenue and didn't recognize anything. I didn't even think I was in West Haven until I saw Willie Fogelbe's statue. And some things are totally new to me, like that mall and all those shopping plazas north of West Haven. Even Foster's Market is new because the last time I saw it, it was a tiny store."

"The town really has changed since you left, especially in the last 15 years. It's tripled in size physically and in population, but all those new folk and all that growth is

out in the suburbs. No one wants to live in town anymore, except the illegals and the negroes. As soon as the whites started moving to the suburbs, those damned negroes raced in here. They have ruined some parts of town.

"I wouldn't go east of Cherrington Boulevard for all the money in Nicholson's bank, and you shouldn't either. They would murder a wealthy-looking white man like you and desecrate your corpse stealing your wallet so they could buy drugs. That's what happened to Mildred Gamicci just last month. She got confused and stepped off the bus on the wrong street. The poor woman didn't last five minutes, and the police only caught the dirty negroes who murdered her because they tried to cash her Social Security check."

Harold slouched on the seat. "This area seems perfectly safe."

"That's because the negroes haven't polluted it yet. My biggest fear is they're going to overrun town one of these days, with Leo Everly leading them down our streets and into the home of every decent white person here. That's why I'm thankful for Rudi Waldegradt and his group. They help keep those awful negroes from invading our part of town."

"If you're that worried, why don't you move?"

"It's not that simple. I have grandkids." George pointed behind the bench.

Harold peered over his shoulder. Three children played on a swing set in a small clearing nearby, two boys on the swings and a girl on the sliding board.

"Someone has to protect them from the likes of Leo Everly." George folded his arms on his chest. "I tried to convince my daughter to move, but she doesn't want to give up her home in South West Haven because her crazy old man thinks it's unsafe. She would rather listen to her liberal husband, but just wait until something bad happens."

"What's your daughter's name? I wonder if I went to school with her?"

"Jennifer Padalovich. You might have known her. You to be seem about the same age."

"I think I remember her. She usually wore her hair in ponytails, didn't she?"

"She still does, and she puts them on her daughter, too."

"After we left West Haven, I lost contact with everyone I went to school with. I have no idea what happened to any of them."

"I can tell you. Most of the young folk leave. They graduate from high school, leave for college, and settle elsewhere. Only a few come back after college. My Jennifer did, as did the McHaney girl, and Roger Donlin. His story's a little different because he went into the armed forces before returning home."

"Roger Donlin? I know that name. Did he go to school with your daughter and me?"

“He sure did, and he graduated from high school the same year as Jennifer. The Donlins lived out on Red Silo Road until they moved to Benjamin.”

Think he was the kid I used to play with.

“Where’s Red Silo Road?”

“Southwest of here, past the old Broughton mine, not too far from where you lived.”

“Roger and I used to be best friends. You said he still lives in West Haven. Do you see him often?”

“I bump into him on occasion, and I talked to him the other week. I was having a problem with the air conditioner in my car, so I stopped at Seidman’s to get his advice.”

“What’s Seidman’s?”

“A department store at Addlington Mall. Roger works in their automotive service center.” George glanced at his grandchildren in the clearing. “You should stop at the mall and see Roger. He’d appreciate meeting an old childhood buddy.”

“I just might do that.”

It would give me something else to do, other than chase after a crashed UFO and that big silver bastard. Shit. Can’t believe I know someone who works in a mall. He must be a manager. Remember he was always interested in cars. Guess it makes sense he’d be involved with them in some way as an adult.

“What do you do for living, Harold?”

“I’m a manager in the research department of a major law firm.”

“You a lawyer?”

“I don’t even have a law degree.”

“That’s good. I didn’t want to stop talking to you because of your profession.” George winked at him. “I don’t like lawyers much, especially since I lost my leg.” He tapped his left calf, and it emitted a hollow thud. “I lost it on the job. I was in a trench, surveying the foundation for the Southern Meadows Mall, when a cable on a crane snapped. It dropped a cement coated steel sewer pipe into the trench, and it rolled onto my leg. The doctors couldn’t do anything other than amputate just below the knee.

“But something worse happened to me in the emergency room. An ambulance chaser nabbed me. He must have been listening to a scanner because he met me at the hospital. He was there before my family, and I should have waited for them before I spoke to this shyster because in my state of shock I wasn’t thinking clearly. I let the crook get me.”

Harold swatted a gnat that buzzed beside his ear. “What did the guy do?”

“I was getting there.” Sitting upright, George waddled backward on the seat. “This slimeball promised to sue everyone involved. He said it was the clearest example of

negligence he had seen in over a decade. He promised to do all the work for a percentage of the awarded damages, and like a fool, I listened to every word he said.”

“Did he file any lawsuits?”

“He sued everyone, just like he said he would, but he settled most of the cases out of court without telling me, and one day, he just handed me a check. It was a darned sweet check, too, so I was darned happy with the results. I thought I had received fair compensation for having lost my leg. Then, I found out the sleazy crook kept 75 percent of the settlements for himself. I only got 25 percent of what I should have received.”

“How did you find out he’d cheated you?”

“I have some friends who are clerks at the county courthouse. When I told them how big the check was, they said that figure didn’t sound right because they had seen some of the papers at the courthouse and knew how big some of the settlements were.

“So I confronted the crook, and do you know what really got me P.O.ed? His reaction. He was indignant that I would complain after everything he did for me, and he told me those were his normal fees. He claimed he couldn’t have done the work for less, and that bastard had all the bills and receipts to justify his exorbitant fees. I know he padded those bills, but I had no way of proving it, so I just walked away, and I have never knowingly talked to a lawyer since then.”

Harold chuckled. “I wouldn’t talk to them either if I wasn’t getting paid for it.”

“What exactly do you do?”

“I’m a project manager in the firm’s research department. The lawyers tell me what information they need for their cases, and I assign people to research and compile it.”

“I can’t imagine you work outside the office or travel much.”

“So much information is available electronically we never have to leave the office, and if we don’t have something in our library, we can retrieve it from a dozen different servers, or we can do the obsolete thing and have a library send it to us.”

Wonder why he cares about this shit?

“Okay, if you’re not a lawyer and you’re not here on business, why were you going to see Leo Everly?”

Wonder if this old fart knows anything about the UFO? Never thought to ask him. Maybe I can learn something useful from him.

“I was hoping to get some information on something that happened in West Haven when we lived here.”

“What specifically are you asking about? I can’t imagine Leo Everly can tell you anything no decent white person in town couldn’t tell you.”

“This incident took place about 30 years ago, when I was six, and it happened in the

third week of September.”

George stared at Harold. “Are you talking about something you saw flying in the sky?”

“I am, and judging by your expression, I suspect you saw it, too.”

“A lot of us saw something that evening. What do you remember seeing?”

Wonder why he’s being so evasive? Suppose I should play along.

“Do you want specific details?”

“Sure, if you can remember them.”

Wonder if it’s worth the hassle?

“All right, since you asked. It was early evening. I’m not entirely certain about the time, but it was still light outside. I was sitting on the living room floor in front of the television, and there was a dog food commercial on. I think the dog was doing back flips or jumping in the air.

“We heard something that sounded like a sonic boom, but it shook the entire house and rattled the windows. Then, we heard this incredible rumbling sound, like the amplified rumbling of a subway train. We went outside on the front lawn, looking for whatever was making the noise, and after a few seconds, the rumbling grew into a deafening roar. It was so loud it drowned out everything, even my thoughts, and I could feel it vibrating my body.

“Then, the thing appeared in the sky. It was egg-shaped. There were flames shooting out the back and thick black smoke behind it. When it was halfway across the sky, it turned sharply and disappeared behind some trees, and even though we couldn’t see it anymore, we could still hear the rumbling. Seconds later, we heard this tremendous explosion somewhere in the distance, and the shockwaves were so powerful they knocked us to the ground.

“When we recovered, my mother dragged me inside and sent me to my room, but I kept looking out the window throughout the night. I remember seeing army trucks going up and down our road, and I saw some troops walking through the fields across from our house. It was a pretty terrifying experience. I’d never seen my mother so frightened.”

George nodded. “You really did see it, didn’t you?”

No, you dick. Just making this up because I like talking to stupid old farts I don’t know.

Leaning forward, George rested his elbows on his knees. “Move a little closer.”

Might learn something about the UFO after all.

He slid sideways until his shoulders brushed against George’s.

“What would you like to know, Harold?”

“Whatever you can tell me. I know what I saw, but I was too young to truly comprehend it, so I’m looking for information that can help me interpret it on an adult level.”

“I think I can answer some of your questions, but honestly, if I hadn’t known your mother and I wasn’t sure you had seen it, I wouldn’t be talking about it with you, and depending upon what you do with what I’m about to tell you, I may never admit we had this conversation.”

“Trust me. I only came back to West Haven to satisfy my own curiosity.”

“We’re all curious about it and wish we could understand it, but I think we’re too scared and proud to discuss it openly, but I’m not too ashamed to try. Where would you like to start?”

“First, I’d like to know what you experienced that night.”

“I have replayed the events over in my head hundreds of times in the past few decades, but it’s been a while since I’ve related them to anyone, so you’ll have to give me a minute to gather my thoughts.”

“Take your time. I’m not in any hurry.”

Not as long as I get what I want.

George placed his fingers over his eyes. After a moment, he exhaled through his hands and dragged them across his face, smoothing the loose skin beneath his eyes. He folded his hands between his knees, his cheeks slightly flushed. “There was a group of us at the fire hall. Hans Wilmut, Ian Rourke, his oldest boy, Patrick, and Jim Foster was there. We had been on the driveway, polishing the chrome on the tanker.

“Patrick was in the cab, about to back it into the garage, when we heard the boom. Ian started yelling at him because he thought the boy had backed into the building, but Jim told him to calm down because it was only a sonic boom. They were always flying jets out of Jhorling, so it wasn’t uncommon to hear four or five booms a week.

“When we heard the rumbling, we realized it wasn’t no ordinary sonic boom. Then that awful racket started. This might sound silly now, but I thought we were getting nuked by the Commies. I was about to drop to my knees and prepare for the end when Jim and I saw that thing come over the hill from Benjamin, the flames and smoke pouring out from it. We just stood there pointing with our jaws wagging like windsocks.

“Since we were partway up the hill overlooking town, we had a perfect view of the thing. It cut to the right towards the west. Then, it cut back towards the east. It just went into reverse, without banking or angling or even slowing down. It was as if a person suddenly stopped and started walking backwards to retrace his steps. When it reached

the eastern tip of town, it shot back to the west. It literally zigzagged across the sky, and we knew we weren't imagining that because we could see a giant Z of black smoke hanging in the air.

"Once it passed the western end of town, it continued up the river a little way before it made a 90-degree turn towards the south and disappeared behind the ridge. And even though we couldn't see it, we knew it was still flying because we could hear that infernal racket. Then all of a sudden, everything went quiet.

"We gathered in front of the tanker and started talking about what had just happened. None of us was really sure what we had seen, but we agreed someone had to have been flying it, and we agreed it must have crashed because of the fire and because the noise ended so abruptly. Hans and Jim swore they heard an explosion right before the racket died, but the rest of us hadn't heard it, so we argued whether there had been an explosion or not.

"While we were gabbing about that, Jim suddenly pointed out that maybe we should try to find the thing and assist the pilot, which sounded like a darned good idea to us because that's the appropriate response for a fire company. You rescue people in need.

"Now, I know what the authorities have said about that thing, and I know what the papers printed in the days following it, but I also know that thing was no meteorite. I'm absolutely sure it was an aircraft. We all know what we saw."

Smiling, Harold stared at the bare ground beneath his feet. "I might not have watched it as long as you had, but I know what I saw wasn't a naturally occurring phenomenon."

Wonder if he'd seen anything like I had that night after the crash?

"It sure wasn't, and I can't believe anyone who had seen it would think anything different, no matter what we were told to believe."

"Did you actually find it?"

"Give me a minute. I'm getting there." He paused. "Now, while we were trying to figure out how we could find that thing, a call came in from someone living along Route 265 south of town. They said it had crashed in the woods over the hill from Boar's Hair Road. That seemed like a good starting place, and we figured we'd see some smoke as we got closer, which would help us to find that thing.

"We fired up the sirens to muster up some help, and while we were waiting for a few more men, we readied the trucks. Hans called the ambulance unit, but they were on another call and didn't know how long it would take. We only had one ambulance at the time, so we decided we would head to the scene and let the ambulance crew catch up to

us when they could.

“Once we fired up the sirens, we didn’t have to wait too long for three or four men to arrive. I only mention that because some folks have accused us of responding too slowly. I’ll be the first to say we normally reacted much faster, but we were all a little shaken by what we had seen, and I think in the backs of our minds, we realized if the pilot hadn’t ejected, he wouldn’t have survived the crash, especially if the aircraft had exploded.

“Now, this was before they built the bypass, so the quickest way to Route 265 was through town and out Cherrington Boulevard. So it took us some time to reach Boar’s Hair Road, even with the sirens and lights going. But here’s where the story gets even weirder.

“When we got to the end of Boar’s Hair Road, where it intersects with Heather Field Lane, some military goons stopped us. They had a roadblock set up and weren’t letting anyone through. We figured something darned bad must have happened if the military was there, so we offered our help, but those goons refused. Only military and government intelligence personnel were permitted in the area. That was their phrase, government intelligence personnel.

“Once it was clear they weren’t about to let us in the area, we returned to the fire hall. We figured if the military was there, it must have been a top secret aircraft that had crashed, and we guessed if the military was involved, they probably had better rescue equipment and better training than we had.

“Even though none of us ever admitted it, I think we were all a little relieved because we had never dealt with something as serious as a plane crash, and we would have been out of our element. You can train for small things like burning houses and automobile accidents and even tornado rescue, but there’s no practical way to train for something as overwhelming as a train or plane wreck. There’s nothing that can prepare you for all the death and destruction.”

Harold looked at George. “I don’t suppose you can train for something like that.”

Don’t give a shit about your editorial comments.

“Did you see anything else that night?”

George wrinkled his nose. “Nothing you’d call exciting, but it was curious. When the military goons turned us away, they ordered us to go back down Boar’s Hair Road. They didn’t even let us pull onto Heather Field Lane, so we had to back down Boar’s Hair Road a piece so we could pull into a field and turn around.

“Then, as we were heading to Route 265, we passed all this heavy equipment coming up Boar’s Hair Road. We had a decent view of it even though it was dark. The first

vehicle was an empty flatbed, and another flatbed carrying a tractor or a backhoe followed it. A dump truck came next, but none of us got a good look at the last vehicle. It looked like a hook and ladder to me, but Patrick and Ian insisted it was a mobile crane, and I would trust them because they had done some construction work and would have recognized a mobile crane. But we never saw any rescue equipment, not a fire truck or an ambulance, not one vehicle with a flashing red light.”

Harold nodded. “You’d think they would’ve called in paramedics or a rescue unit, especially since they had to have known it was a manned aircraft.”

“That’s what we didn’t understand. We were expecting them to be equipped for a rescue mission, but they came prepared for a recovery mission. The only thing we could figure was they had been in radio contact with the pilot and knew he was all right, and that would explain how they arrived at the scene within minutes of the crash, which is impressive considering the closest military installation is Strattonbrooke Reserve Base, which is a good 30 miles south of here.”

More likely, they had mobilized a recovery team while they were still tracking the UFO on radar and triangulated search coordinates the second it hit the ground.

Harold shrugged. “I think the more important question is whether they took anything out. Do you know if anyone saw the empty flatbed leaving the area?”

“I can say at least two people, both policemen, saw it coming out. I was good friends with one of them, Simon Policastro. We grew up together on south Emmathea Street. He told me what happened to him that night.

“He was on evening patrol with Frank Nevin that week because he was covering for Frank’s regular partner, who was away on his honeymoon. They were on Route 265, north of town, debating where to go for dinner, when they heard the sonic boom. They didn’t give it any attention until they heard the racket and saw that thing flying overhead. They thought it was an airplane that was about to crash, so their first instinct was to follow it.

“They chased after it, driving down Route 265 as fast as they could without endangering anyone, but they couldn’t keep up with it. When they got to the top of Addlington Avenue, the thing was already flying toward the western end of town, so they sped off in that direction. They drove past the fire hall with the sirens and lights going, but I never noticed them because we couldn’t hear anything over the noise that thing made.”

Harold pressed his fingertips together. “If they couldn’t keep up with it, how did they find the crash site?”

“Well, Simon and Frank had started down Route 180 because they hadn’t seen that

thing turn to the south because the buildings in town blocked their view, but someone had called the station house to report that the thing had crashed near Gurty's Hollow, so the dispatcher sent them down Butter Churn Road towards Gurty's Hollow. They were almost there when they got another call from the dispatcher. They had received several reports confirming that it had crashed off Heather Field Lane.

"Simon and Frank knew most of the back roads in that area, so they crossed over from Gurty's Hollow to Cherry Oak Lane in almost no time, and they followed that straight to Heather Field Lane. Now, they were on Heather Field Lane not too long after the crash, and they reached the intersection with Boar's Hair Road before the military set up the roadblock, so they continued down Heather Field Lane.

"But they hadn't gone much past Boar's Hair Road when they encountered a caravan of military vehicles flying down Heather Field Lane in the other direction. They were coming right down the middle of the road, and Simon had swerve into a field to avoid hitting them, but the military vehicles didn't even slow down. They just kept barreling down the road like they hadn't even seen the patrol car.

"Now, Simon could be hot headed some times, and getting run off the road by some military types speeding in his jurisdiction really got him P.O.ed. He wanted to start pursuing them, but Frank told him to forget about it because they had to find the crashed airplane. So as they were sitting there arguing over what to do, these civilian-looking cars showed up and surrounded the patrol car.

"Getting blocked in by some civilians after getting run off the road was more than Simon could take. He jumped out of the patrol car and was about to arrest them all for obstructing an officer of the law when they jumped out of their vehicles, too. That really spooked Simon, so he started reaching for his gun. Then, one of them identified himself as a government intelligence agent and told Simon that executive authorization gave them full jurisdiction in the matter. Simon was so shocked he just stood there dumbfounded.

"Then, these intelligence agents started questioning Simon and Frank about why they were in the area and what the police knew about the crash. And when Simon or Frank asked them any thing, the agents gave them vague answers about national security. They wouldn't even say what matter they had jurisdiction over. They simply demanded Simon and Frank's complete cooperation.

"Being the decent patriotic type, Simon considered it his duty to serve and obey regardless of the command, especially since it was a matter of national security. These agents told them to set up a roadblock at the end of Heather Field Lane where it met Cherry Oak Lane, and they were instructed to only let military and government

intelligence personnel into the area. So they did what they were told.

“Simon and Frank stayed there a good part of the night, long after their shift had ended, because it was an emergency and they felt obligated to stay as long as they were needed. Now, they didn’t see any civilians, which is understandable because most of the folk who lived out there were farmers who went to bed early, but throughout the night, dozens of military vehicles passed through their roadblock. There were jeeps and personnel carriers and some unmarked cars with military or government drivers. Simon figured they were the staff cars of generals or some important government types. He also saw a few vehicles that looked like delivery trucks.

“Aside from all the military vehicles, there were lots of soldiers walking around, and they were armed. At one point, Simon saw about 100 of them in the woods with flashlights. They were walking abreast as if they were searching for something or hunting something.”

Harold crossed his legs. “Does he know if they found anything?”

Bet I know what they were after.

George shook his head. “If they did, they didn’t tell Simon, and when they passed through the roadblock, they only told him their name, rank, and serial number. They were very serious as if they were on some super-secret mission. They didn’t even smile.

“Those government intelligence agents weren’t anymore talkative. Simon and Frank only heard from them two or three times the whole night, and one of the times, they told Simon and Frank to move the roadblock to Route 265 just north of Boar’s Hair Road.

“So they set up a roadblock on the highway about 20 yards from the intersection. They didn’t have any problems shutting down the highway because Route 265 was only two lanes wide back then and there wasn’t a lot of traffic at night. Everything closed at five, and folks didn’t have stuff shipped to them overnight from the other side of planet. Everything moved at a slower pace then.”

Nothing could be slower than the way you’re telling this story.

Harold shifted sideways on the bench. “So when did your friend see the empty flatbed?”

“Well, not long after they had set up the roadblock, a convoy of slow-moving vehicles came down Boar’s Hair Road. Simon was close enough to the junction he could see just about everything in the headlights of the vehicles. From what he could tell, one of the civilian-looking cars led the convoy, and a jeep and a personnel carrier followed it. The flatbed and one of those vehicles that looked like a delivery truck came next. Then, more jeeps and personnel carriers came after them. There were at least seven vehicles total, not including the flatbed.

“Simon knew something massive was on the flatbed because he saw it in the headlights of the vehicle that looked like a delivery truck. He thinks armed soldiers were posted at either end of the flatbed, but he wasn’t too sure because he was staring at the thing on the flatbed. It was covered with a tarp, but he could tell it was egg-shaped, just like the thing we had all seen in the sky, and he thought it was strapped down with chains because he heard chains banging against the side of the flatbed.”

Harold leaned against the bench’s armrest. “How long did he actually see the flatbed?”

“You might not think he had enough time to notice all those details, but the flatbed was moving awfully slow because the thing was so heavy, and the roads were so narrow the flatbed had to back up once so it could cut the corner onto Route 265.”

“That makes sense.” Harold nodded. “Where did it go after that?”

“No one’s really sure. Simon saw the whole convoy head south down Route 265, so we figure it went to Strattonbrooke Reserve Base because that was the closest government facility.”

“What did your friend do then?”

“Simon stayed at his post because he had been ordered to man the roadblock as long as necessary. He and Frank stayed there until one of those government intelligence agents showed up to relieve them of their duty.

“Which is another reason why we think they took that thing to Strattonbrooke. We figure they closed Route 265 because they wanted the road to be empty, and the time Simon and Frank maintained the roadblock was more than enough for the convoy to reach Strattonbrooke, even at the rate of 15 or 20 miles an hour.”

Harold rubbed the back of his neck. “I have to confess I’ve never thought about what happened to the thing after they retrieved it.”

“That’s odd because that’s what I think about most.”

“I guess I’ve never thought about it because I’m more interested in the crash site, and I’m curious about one thing in particular.”

“What’s that?”

“Considering everything you’ve told me, it seems that you and your friend were probably only a mile or two from the site.”

“We believe so.”

“And considering what else you’ve told me, there were plenty of government and military people who were actually at the site.”

“Someone had to put that thing on the flatbed.”

“But were any of them from West Haven?”

George brushed a blade of grass from his shirt sleeve. "We don't really know because we have never figured out who was there."

"I'm not following you."

"A few days after that thing crashed, I heard an odd story from one of the fellows at the fire hall who was friends with a reporter from the News Chronicle. This reporter said when he and some other reporters were stopped at the roadblock on Boar's Hair Road, they noticed the soldiers manning it weren't wearing any division or unit patches. Since he needed the facts for his newspaper story, he called Strattonbrooke the next day to find out what division the soldiers belonged to and where they were stationed. Whoever he spoke to said all the troops involved in the maneuver were from the reserve unit in town. That's how the folks at Strattonbrooke described it, a maneuver.

"Now, when I heard this, I asked Simon because he belonged to the reserves and knew all the reservists in town. He didn't recognize any of the soldiers who came through his roadblock, and he had asked all the fellows he served with in the reserves. None of them had taken part in the maneuver, and they didn't know anyone else who had."

Harold frowned. "So as far as you know, no one from West Haven was at the site."

"Nobody who can prove they were there."

"Do you know if anyone has visited the site since that night?"

"None of us from the fire hall ever tried to find it. We thought about it a few times because we were curious why they wouldn't let us into the area, but since we didn't know the exact location, we never did more than talk about it.

"And I had heard about a few people who tried to get into the area the next day because they wanted to see what had happened, but some of those government intelligence agents stopped them and ordered them to leave the area, so when folks heard the government goons were still guarding it, they decided to stay away.

"Then, Ed Kappel caused a big stink with that cockeyed editorial of his. We all knew what we saw wasn't a meteorite, but Ed wasn't happy letting us think we had witnessed some new secret weapon. He had to start rumors it was one of those flying saucers. That's when the national press picked up the story and the media circus arrived. They twisted his editorial around to make it seem like everyone in town was seeing UFOs and little green men. Because of him, the whole world was laughing at us. We were labeled crazy hillbillies.

"That scared everyone into silence. Ever since, no one has been too keen on talking about it. We don't even talk about it among ourselves anymore, but we don't need to because we all know what we saw, and like I told you, if I hadn't known your mother

and wasn't sure you had seen it yourself, I never would have told you half of what I know."

He smiled at George. "I appreciate your openness. I was starting to think I'd wasted my vacation by coming to West Haven."

Wonder if I can get anything else out of this old fuck?

Harold watched a silver and blue sports utility vehicle pass by, a young woman driving it, an infant car seat on the back seat. "You have a pretty good idea where the thing crashed. Would you mind taking me out there, maybe this evening or tomorrow? I'm a little anxious to see the site for myself."

"You couldn't pay me to go there." Laughing, George wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "And I don't think you'll find anyone in town who'd take you out there either."

"Why not?"

"Because the place is a toxic waste dump. Broughton Allied Industries had been dumping residues from their mining projects there for decades, long before that thing ever crashed. When they expanded into plastics and chemicals, they kept dumping toxic waste out there. They only stopped because someone finally blew the whistle on them. The government conducted a huge investigation into Broughton Allied, and they were convicted of illegally dumping hazardous materials. The government levied a large fine on them and sealed off the area.

"They would have forced Broughton Allied to clean up the area, but that would have endangered the lives of the workers. All the hazardous materials were stored in tin drums, and the tin had already started to corrode, so it would have been impossible to move any them without rupturing them. The only solution was to seal the area until all the hazardous materials dissipated naturally. That was the government's phrase, dissipated naturally. They said the area wouldn't be habitable for at least several hundred years."

Harold rubbed his thigh. "When did they close the area?"

"22 or 23 years ago. It was some time after the crash."

"And people believe that?"

"We're not gullible folk, Harold. The government has pictures of the area showing polluted ponds and huge pits filled with corroded barrels. A few people had seen trucks carrying tin barrels into the area, and we all know Broughton Allied paid the fined. A TV news crew even did a story on it some years back. They shot footage of barbed wire fences surrounding the area, and there were toxic hazard signs posted everywhere. I think that's strong enough evidence to convince everyone here it's true."

It's only evidence that people in West Haven are about as intelligent as the shit that comes out of their cows.

"If no one would willingly take me there, do you at least know someone who could tell me more about the site? Are you absolutely certain no one from West Haven saw it that night?"

"I told you. Nobody has ever proved they were there."

"So someone's claimed to have been there."

Wonder why this old fuck is dicking around with me?

George glanced at the three children playing in the clearing. "I wouldn't give this story much credence if I were you, but the scuttlebutt around town is Leo Everly was the first person at the site. He claims he was there even before the military and government personnel."

"Why didn't you tell me that sooner?"

"Because I don't believe that lying little negro. Nobody heard that story until about 10 years after it happened, and I didn't hear it myself until about 15 years ago when Leo started trying to get information about that thing from the government. If he was really there the night it happened, why did he wait so long to tell anyone? A normal, honest person would share a story like that immediately. So I refuse to believe it's true, but I have heard it from a number of folks, and I would consider some of them to be credible."

"Did they hear this story from Leo or some other source?"

"Some of them heard it from Leo. He claims he was nearby when the thing come down and ran to see what it was. He says he got there just minutes after it crashed and stayed until the military goons showed up. Now, I'm not calling him a liar, but we have no proof he was there. He didn't have a camera, he didn't take any pieces of the wreckage, and he couldn't have left the area without being seen or getting stopped at one of the roadblocks."

But there's no evidence to prove he wasn't there. We only have his word. Shit. Have to believe him or doubt him.

"You said Leo tried to get information from the government. Do you know if anyone else in West Haven requested the same information?"

"I can give you the names of at least two people who received the same information."

"Two?"

George smiled and leaned toward Harold.

Why didn't you tell me sooner, you jerk-off? The old bastard probably just wanted to

talk to someone. Why me? Couldn't he have found some other lonely old fuck to talk to?

He poked Harold's leg. "One of them is a liberal reporter named Jack, but you want to avoid him. He'll just fill your head with his liberal crap. My Jennifer used to be the sweetest girl until she met him and he polluted her mind.

"The person you want to meet is Mike Orzirrinski. That thing crashed in the woods about a mile behind his mother's house. She has never talked about anything that happened that night, but studying the thing has become Mike's pet project. He may have been too young to remember it, but he can tell you more about that thing than that little negro ever could.

"Now, Mike insists it was one of those flying saucers, and I don't believe that anymore than I believe Leo's story about being at the site, but you'll be interested in what Mike has to say. Just keep open-minded enough to ignore his talk about flying saucers and little green men."

He studied George's face. "It crashed behind his mother's house?"

"It sure did."

"And he believes it was a UFO?"

Think I just found my source.

"It's one of his idiosyncrasies. You just have to ignore it."

Think I'll have some fun with the old geezer.

"If you don't believe it was a UFO, what do you think it was?"

George stared at a patch of worn fabric on his trousers, the muscles of his face tightening. "Judging the facts as I witnessed them, I would say that thing was some kind of aircraft, and since the military responded so quickly, I would say it was some kind of top-secret experimental aircraft. I don't know who it belonged to, us or the Russians, but I can say for sure that it was an aircraft built by humans."

Too scared of the truth, aren't you old man?

High-pitched screaming erupted from the clearing. As Harold and George turned toward the swing set, the three children began running toward the street, blades of mown grass swirling around their ankles. They stopped on the sidewalk. The tallest boy grabbed George's left hand, the other boy his right.

"What do you ruffians want from an old man?"

The girl jumped in the air, her ponytails flailing. "Ice cream. Ice cream."

"We want ice cream." Leaning backward, the boys tugged on his hands.

"I'll give you anything you ask for. Just don't beat me up." George stood and smiled at Harold. "I like to spoil the grandkids because it annoys their father. Go see Mike Orzirrinski. He's a good white boy, not one of those filthy negroes."

After speaking with the children, George began walking along the sidewalk, the children running before him.

That was informative. Glad I ran into that old fart. Rather talk to him than waste my breath with Leo Everly. Wonder what I would've done once I'd realized Leo was black? Doubt I would've talked to him. What could I have said to him? We have nothing in common, and the UFO isn't a strong enough reason to talk to him.

Just glad I found another source who knows more about the UFO than anyone else, and the crash site was right behind his house. Amazing. Wonder how I find this Mike Orzirrinski? Suppose it can't be that difficult. He's probably listed in the phonebook.