

STEPHEN KING'S

N



MARVEL
LIMITED SERIES
1 of 4

MARC GUGGENHEIM · ALEX MALEEV

N.

Stephen King

1. The Letter

May 28, 2008

Dear Charlie,

It seems both strange and perfectly natural to call you that, although when I last saw you I was nearly half the age I am now. I was sixteen and had a terrible crush on you. (Did you know? Of course you did.) Now I'm a happily married woman with a little boy, and I see you all the time on CNN, talking about Things Medical. You are as handsome now (well, almost!) as you were "back in the day," when the three of us used to go fishing and to movies at The Railroad in Freeport.

Those summers seem like a long time ago — you and Johnny inseparable, me tagging along whenever you'd let me. Which was probably more often than I deserved! Yet your note of condolence brought it all back to me, and how I cried. Not just for Johnny, but for all three of us. And, I suppose, for how simple and uncomplicated life seemed. How golden we were!

You saw his obituary, of course. "Accidental death" can cover such a multitude of sins, can't it? In the news story, Johnny's death was reported as the result of a fall, and of course he did fall — at a spot we all knew well, one he had asked me about only last Christmas — but it was no accident. There was a good deal of sedative in his bloodstream. Not nearly enough to kill him, but according to the coroner it could have been enough to disorient him, especially if he was looking over the railing. Hence, "accidental death."

But I know it was suicide.

There was no note at home or on his body, but that might have been Johnny's idea of a kindness. And you, as a doctor yourself, will know that psychiatrists have an extremely high rate of suicide. It's as if the patients' woes are a kind of acid, eating away at the psychic

defenses of their therapists. In the majority of cases, those defenses are thick enough to remain intact. In Johnny's? I think not thanks to one unusual patient. And he wasn't sleeping much during the last two or three months of his life; such terrible dark circles under his eyes! Also, he was canceling appointments right & left. Going on long drives. He would not say where, but I think I may know.

That brings me to the enclosure, which I hope you will look at when you finish this letter. I know you are busy, but — if it will help! — think of me as the love-struck girl I was, with my hair tied back in a ponytail that was always coming loose, forever tagging along!

Although Johnny was on his own, he had formed a loose affiliation with two other “shrinks” in the last four years of his life. His current case files (not many, due to his cutting back) went to one of these Drs. following his death. Those files were in his office. But when I was cleaning out his study at home, I came upon the little manuscript I have enclosed. They are case notes for a patient he calls “N.,” but I have seen his more formal case notes on a few occasions (not to snoop, but only because a folder happened to be open on his desk), and I know this is not like those. For one thing, they weren't done in his office, because there is no heading, as on the other case notes I have seen, and there is no red CONFIDENTIAL stamp at the bottom. Also, you will notice a faint vertical line on the pages. His home printer does this.

But there was something else, which you will see when you unwrap the box. He has printed two words on the cover in thick black strokes: BURN THIS. I almost did, without looking inside. I thought, God help me, it might be his private stash of drugs or print-outs of some weird strain of Internet pornography. In the end, daughter of Pandora that I am, my curiosity got the best of me. I wish it hadn't.

Charlie, I have an idea my brother may have been planning a book, something popular in the style of Oliver Sacks. Judging by this piece of manuscript, it was obsessive-compulsive behavior he was initially focused on, and when I add in his suicide (if it was suicide!), I

wonder if his interest didn't spring from that old adage "Physician, Heal Thyself!"

In any case, I found the account of N., and my brother's increasingly fragmentary notes, disturbing. How disturbing? Enough so I'm forwarding the manuscript — which I have not copied, by the way, this is the only one — to a friend he hadn't seen in ten years and I haven't seen in fourteen. Originally I thought, "Perhaps this could be published. It could serve as a kind of living memorial to my brother."

But I no longer think that. The thing is, the manuscript seems alive, and not in a good way. I know the places that are mentioned, you see (I'll bet you know some of them, too — the field N. speaks of, as Johnny notes, must have been close to where we went to school as children), and since reading the pages, I feel a strong desire to see if I can find it. Not in spite of the manuscript's disturbing nature but because of it — and if that isn't obsessional, what is?!?

I don't think finding it would be a good idea.

But Johnny's death haunts me, and not just because he was my brother. So does the enclosed manuscript. Would you read it? Read it and tell me what you think? Thank you, Charlie. I hope this isn't too much of an intrusion. And if you should decide to honor Johnny's request and burn it, you would never hear a murmur of protest from me.

Fondly,

From Johnny Bonsaint's "little sis,"

Sheila Bonsaint LeClaire

964 Lisbon Street

Lewiston, Maine 04240

PS — Oy, such a crush I had on you!

2. The Case Notes

June 1, 2007

N. is 48 years old, a partner in a large Portland accounting firm, divorced, the father of two daughters. One is doing postgraduate work in California, the other is a junior at a college here in Maine. He describes his current relationship with his ex-wife as “distant but amicable.”

He says, “I know I look older than 48. It’s because I haven’t been sleeping. I’ve tried Ambien and the other one, the green moth one, but they only make me feel groggy.”

When I ask how long he’s been suffering from insomnia, he needs no time to think it over.

“Ten months.”

I ask him if it’s the insomnia that brought him to me. He smiles up at the ceiling. Most patients choose the chair, at least on their first visit — one woman told me that lying on the couch would make her feel like “a joke neurotic in a New Yorker cartoon” — but N. has gone directly to the couch. He lies there with his hands laced tightly together on his chest.

“I think we both know better than that, Dr. Bonsaint,” he says.

I ask him what he means.

“If I only wanted to get rid of the bags under my eyes, I’d either see a plastic surgeon or go to my family doctor — who recommended you, by the way, he says you’re very good — and ask for something stronger than Ambien or the green moth pills. There must be stronger stuff, right?”

I say nothing to this.

“As I understand it, insomnia’s always a symptom of something else.”

I tell him that isn’t always so, but in most cases it is. And, I add, if there is another problem, insomnia is rarely the only symptom.

“Oh, I have others,” he says. “Tons. For instance, look at my shoes.”

I look at his shoes. They are lace-up brogans. The left one is tied at the top, but the right has been tied at the bottom. I tell him that’s very interesting.

“Yes,” he says. “When I was in high school, it was the fashion of girls to tie their sneakers at the bottom if they were going steady. Or if there was a boy they liked and they wanted to go steady.”

I ask him if he’s going steady, thinking this may break the tension I see in his posture — the knuckles of his laced-together hands are white, as if he fears they might fly away unless he exerts a certain amount of pressure to keep them where they are — but he doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t even smile.

“I’m a little past the going-steady stage of life,” he says, “but there is something I want.”

He considers.

“I tried tying both of my shoes at the bottom. It didn’t help. But one up and one down — that actually seems to do some good.” He frees his right hand from the deathgrip his left has on it and holds it up with the thumb and forefinger almost touching. “About this much.”

I ask him what he wants.

“For my mind to be right again. But trying to cure one’s mind by tying one’s shoelaces according to some high school code of communication slightly adjusted to fit the current situation that’s crazy, wouldn’t you say? And crazy people should seek help. If they

have any sanity left at all — which I flatter myself I do — they know that. So here I am.”

He slides his hands together again and looks at me with defiance and fright. Also, I think, with some relief. He’s lain awake trying to imagine what it will be like to tell a psychiatrist that he fears for his sanity, and when he did it, I neither ran shrieking from the room nor called for the men in the white coats. Some patients imagine I have a posse of such white-coated men in the very next room, equipped with butterfly nets and straitjackets.

I ask him to give me some instances of his current mental wrongness, and he shrugs.

“The usual OCD shit. You’ve heard it all a hundred times before. It’s the underlying cause I came here to deal with. What happened in August of last year. I thought maybe you could hypnotize me and make me forget it.” He looks at me hopefully.

I tell him that, while nothing is impossible, hypnotism works better when it’s employed as an aid to memory rather than as a block.

“Ah,” he says. “I didn’t know that. Shit.” He looks up at the ceiling again. The muscles in the side of his face are working, and I think he has something more to say. “It could be dangerous, you know.” He stops, but this is only a pause; the muscles along his jaw are still flexing and relaxing. “What’s wrong with me could be very dangerous.” Another pause. “To me.” Another pause. “Possibly to others.”

Every therapy session is a series of choices; branching roads with no signposts. Here I could ask him what it is — the dangerous thing — but I elect not to. Instead I ask him what sort of OCD shit he’s talking about. Other than the one-up, one-down tying thing, which is a pretty damn good example. (I do not say this.)

“You know it all,” he says, and gives me a sly look that makes me a bit uncomfortable. I don’t show it; he isn’t the first patient who has

made me uncomfortable. Psychiatrists are spelunkers, really, and any spelunker will tell you that caves are full of bats and bugs. Not nice, but most are essentially harmless.

I ask him to humor me. And to remember that we are still just getting to know each other.

“Not going steady just yet, eh?”

No, I tell him, not quite yet.

“Well, we better be soon,” he says, “because I’m at Condition Orange here, Dr. Bonsaint. Edging into Condition Red.”

I ask him if he counts things.

“Of course I do,” he says. “The number of clues in the New York Times crossword puzzles and on Sundays I count twice, because those puzzles are bigger and double-checking seems in order. Necessary, in fact. My own footsteps. Number of telephone rings when I call someone. I eat at the Colonial Diner on most workdays, it’s three blocks from the office, and on my way there I’ll count black shoes. On my way back, I’ll count brown ones. I tried red once, but that was ridiculous. Only women wear red shoes, and not many, at that. Not in the daytime. I only counted three pair, so I went back to the Colonial and started again, only the second time I counted brown shoes.”

I ask him if he has to count a certain number of shoes in order to achieve satisfaction.

“Thirty’s good,” he says. “Fifteen pair. Most days, that’s no problem.”

And why is it necessary to reach a certain number?

He considers, then looks at me. “If I say ‘you know,’ will you just ask me to explain what it is you’re supposed to know? I mean, you’ve dealt with OCD before and I’ve researched it — exhaustively — both

in my own head and on the Internet, so can't we just cut to the chase?"

I say that most counters feel that reaching a certain total, known as "the goal number," is necessary to maintain order. To keep the world spinning on its axis, so to speak.

He nods, satisfied, and the floodgates break.

"One day, when I was counting my way back to the office, I passed a man with one leg cut off at the knee. He was on crutches, with a sock on his stump. If he'd been wearing a black shoe, it would have been no problem. Because I was on my way back, you see. But it was brown. That threw me off for the whole day, and that night I couldn't sleep at all. Because odd numbers are bad." He taps the side of his head. "At least up here they are. There's a rational part of my mind that knows it's all bullshit, but there's another part that knows it absolutely isn't, and that part rules. You'd think that when nothing bad happened — in fact something good happened that day, an IRS audit we were worried about was canceled for absolutely no reason — the spell would break, but it didn't. I'd counted thirty-seven brown shoes instead of thirty-eight, and when the world didn't end, that irrational part of my mind said it was because I not only got above thirty, I got well above thirty.

"When I load the dishwasher, I count plates. If there's an even number above ten in there, all is well. If not, I add the correct number of clean ones to make it right. Same with forks and spoons. There has to be at least twelve pieces in the little plastic caddy at the front of the dishwasher. Which, since I live alone now, usually means adding clean ones."

What about knives, I ask, and he shakes his head at once.

"Never knives. Not in the dishwasher."

When I ask why not, he says he doesn't know. Then, after a pause, he gives me a guilty sideways look. "I always wash the knives by

hand, in the sink.”

Knives in the silverware caddy would disturb the order of the world, I suggest.

“No!” he exclaims. “You understand, Dr. Bonsaint, but you don’t understand completely.”

Then you have to help me, I say.

“The order of the world is already disturbed. I disturbed it last summer, when I went to Ackerman’s Field. Only I didn’t understand. Not then.”

But you do now? I ask.

“Yes. Not everything, but enough.”

I ask him if he is trying to fix things or only trying to keep the situation from getting worse.

A look of unutterable relief fills his face, relaxing all the muscles there. Something that has been crying out for articulation has finally been spoken aloud. These are the moments I live for. It’s not a cure, far from it, but for the time being N. has gotten some relief. I doubt if he expected it. Most patients do not.

“I can’t fix it,” he whispers. “But I can keep things from getting worse. Yes. I have been.”

Again I have come to one of those branching points. I could ask him what happened last summer — last August, I presume — in Ackerman’s Field, but it is probably still too early. Better to loosen the roots of this infected tooth a little more first. And I really doubt that the source of the infection can be so recent. More likely, whatever happened to him last summer was only a kind of firing pin.

I ask him to tell me about his other symptoms.

He laughs. “That would take all day, and we only have ” He glances at his wrist. ” twenty-two minutes left. Twenty-two is a good number, by the way.”

Because it’s even? I ask.

His nod suggests I am wasting time with the obvious.

“My my symptoms, as you call them come in clusters.” Now he’s looking up at the ceiling. “There are three of these clusters. They poke out of me the sane part of me like rocks rocks, you know oh God, dear God like the fucking rocks in that fucking field “

Tears are coursing down his cheeks. At first he doesn’t seem to notice, only lies on the couch with his fingers laced together, looking up at the ceiling. But then he reaches for the table beside him, where sits what Sandy, my receptionist, calls The Eternal Box of Kleenex. He takes two, wipes his cheeks, then crumples the tissue. It disappears into the lace of his fingers.

“There are three clusters,” he resumes, speaking in a voice that isn’t quite steady. “Counting is the first. It’s important, but not so important as touching. There are certain things I need to touch. Stove-burners, for instance. Before leaving the house in the morning or going to bed at night. I might be able to see they’re off — all the dials pointing straight up, all the burners dark — but I still have to touch them to be absolutely sure. And the front of the oven door, of course. Then I started touching the light switches before leaving the house or the office. Just a quick double-tap. Before I get into my car, I have to tap four times on the roof. And six times when I get to where I’m going. Four’s a good number, and six is an okay number, but ten ten is like ” I can see one tear-track he’s missed, running a zigzag course from the corner of his right eye to the lobe of his ear.

Like going steady with the girl of your dreams? I suggest.

He smiles. He has a lovely, weary smile — a smile that’s finding it increasingly hard to get up in the morning.

“That’s right,” he says. “And she’s got her sneaker laces tied at the bottom so everyone knows it.”

You touch other things? I ask, knowing the answer to this. I have seen many cases like N. during the five years I’ve been in practice. I sometimes picture these unfortunates as men and women being pecked to death by predatory birds. The birds are invisible — at least until a psychiatrist who is good, or lucky, or both, sprays them with his version of Luminol and shines the right light on them — but they are nevertheless very real. The wonder is that so many OCDs manage to live productive lives, just the same. They work, they eat (often not enough or too much, it’s true), they go to movies, they make love to their girlfriends and boyfriends, their wives and husbands and all the time those birds are there, clinging to them and pecking away little bits of flesh.

“I touch many things,” he says, and again favors the ceiling with his weary, charming smile. “You name it, I touch it.”

So counting is important, I say, but touching is more important. What is above touching?

“Placing,” he says, and suddenly begins to shiver all over, like a dog that’s been left out in a cold rain. “Oh God.”

He suddenly sits up and swings his legs over the edge of the couch. On the table beside him there is a vase of flowers in addition to The Eternal Box of Kleenex. Moving very quickly, he shifts the box and the vase so they are diagonal to each other. Then he takes two of the tulips from the vase and lays them stem to stem so that one blossom touches the Kleenex box and the other the vase.

“That makes it safe,” he says. He hesitates, then nods as if he’s confirmed in his mind that what he’s thinking is the right thing. “It preserves the world.” He hesitates again. “For now.”

I glance down at my watch. Time is up, and we’ve done quite enough for one day.

“Next week,” I say. “Same bat-time, same bat-station.” Sometimes I turn this little joke into a question, but not with N. He needs to come back, and knows it.

“No magical cure, huh?” he asks. This time the smile is almost too sad to look at.

I tell him that he may feel better. (This sort of positive suggestion never hurts, as all psychiatrists know.) Then I tell him to throw away his Ambien and “the green moth pills” — Lunesta, I assume. If they don’t work at night, all they can do is cause trouble for him during his waking hours. Falling asleep on the 295 Connector won’t solve any of his problems.

“No,” he says. “I suppose not. Doc, we never discussed the root cause. I know what it is — “

Next week we may get to that, I tell him. In the meantime, I want him to keep a chart divided into three sections: counting, touching, and placing. Will he do that?

“Yes,” he says.

I ask him, almost casually, if he feels suicidal.

“The thought has crossed my mind, but I have a great deal to do.”

This is an interesting and rather troubling response.

I give him my card and tell him to call — day or night — if the idea of suicide begins to seem more attractive. He says he will. But then, almost all of them promise.

“In the meantime,” I say at the door, putting my hand on his shoulder, “keep going steady with life.”

He looks at me, pale and not smiling now, a man being pecked to pieces by invisible birds. “Have you ever read ‘The Great God Pan,’ by Arthur Machen?”

I shake my head.

“It’s the most terrifying story ever written,” he says. “In it, one of the characters says ‘lust always prevails.’ But lust isn’t what he means. What he means is compulsion.”

Paxil? Perhaps Prozac. But neither until I get a better fix on this interesting patient.

June 7, 2007

June 14, 2007

June 28, 2007

N. brings his “homework” to our next session, as I fully expected he would. There are many things in this world you can’t depend on, and many people you can’t trust, but OCDs, unless they are dying, almost always complete their tasks.

In a way his charts are comical; in another way, sad; in another, frankly horrible. He is an accountant, after all, and I assume he’s used one of his accounting programs to create the contents of the folder he hands me before proceeding to the couch. They are spreadsheets. Only instead of investments and income-flow, these charts detail the complex terrain of N.’s obsessions. The top two sheets are headed COUNTING; the next two TOUCHING; the final six PLACING. Thumbing through them, I’m hard put to understand how he finds time for any other activities. Yet OCDs almost always find a way. The idea of invisible birds recurs to me; I see them roosting all over N., pecking away his flesh in bloody nibbles.

When I look up, he’s on the couch, once more with his hands laced together tightly on his chest. And he’s rearranged the vase and the tissue-box so they are again connected on a diagonal. The flowers are white lilies today. Seeing them that way, laid out on the table, makes me think of funerals.

“Please don’t ask me to put them back,” he says, apologetic but firm. “I’ll leave before I do that.”

I tell him I have no intention of asking him to put them back. I hold up the spreadsheets and compliment him on how professional they look. He shrugs. I then ask him if they represent an overview or if they only cover the last week.

“Just the last week,” he says. As if the matter is of no interest to him. I suppose it is not. A man being pecked to death by birds can have little interest in last year’s insults and injuries, or even last week’s; he’s got today on his mind. And, God help him, the future.

“There must be two or three thousand items here,” I say.

“Call them events. That’s what I call them. There are six hundred and four counting events, eight hundred and seventy-eight touching events, and twenty-two hundred and forty-six placing events. All even numbers, you’ll notice. They add up to thirty-seven hundred and twenty-eight, also an even number. If you add the individual numbers in that total — 3728 — you come out with twenty, also even. A good number.” He nods, as if confirming this to himself. “Divide 3728 by two and you come out with eighteen-hundred and sixty-four. 1864 adds up to nineteen, a powerful odd number. Powerful and bad.” He actually shivers a little.

“You must be very tired,” I say.

To this he makes no verbal reply, nor does he nod, but he answers, all the same. Tears trickle down his cheeks toward his ears. I am reluctant to add to his burden, but I recognize one fact: if we don’t begin this work soon — “no ditzing around,” as Sister Sheila would say — he won’t be capable of the work at all. I can already see a deterioration in his appearance (wrinkled shirt, indifferent shave, hair badly in need of a trim), and if I asked his colleagues about him, I would almost surely see those quick exchanged glances that tell so much. The spreadsheets are amazing in their way, but N. is clearly running out of strength. It seems to me that there is no choice but to

fly directly to the heart of the matter, and until that heart is reached, there will be no Paxil or Prozac or anything else.

I ask if he is ready to tell me what happened last August.

“Yes,” he says. “It’s what I came to do.” He takes some tissues from the Eternal Box and wipes his cheeks. Wearily. “But Doc are you sure?”

I have never had a patient ask me that, or speak to me in quite that tone of reluctant sympathy. But I tell him yes, I’m sure. My job is to help him, but in order for me to do that, he must be willing to help himself.

“Even if it puts you at risk of winding up like I am now? Because it could happen. I’m lost, but I think — I hope — that I haven’t gotten to the drowning-man state, so panicky I’d be willing to pull down anyone who was trying to save me.”

I tell him I don’t quite understand.

“I’m here because all this may be in my head,” he says, and knocks his knuckles against his temple, as if he wants to make sure I know where his head is at. “But it might not be. I can’t really tell. That’s what I mean when I say I’m lost. And if it’s not mental — if what I saw and sensed in Ackerman’s Field is real — then I’m carrying a kind of infection. Which I could pass on to you.”

Ackerman’s Field. I make a note of it, although everything will be on the tapes. When we were children, my sister and I went to Ackerman School, in the little town of Harlow, on the banks of the Androscoggin. Which is not far from here; thirty miles at most.

I tell him I’ll take my chances, and say that in the end — more positive reinforcement — I’m sure we’ll both be fine.

He utters a hollow, lonely laugh. “Wouldn’t that be nice,” he says.

“Tell me about Ackerman’s Field.”

He sighs and says, “It’s in Motton. On the east side of the Androscoggin.”

Motton. One town over from Chester’s Mill. Our mother used to buy milk and eggs at Boy Hill Farm in Motton. N. is talking about a place that cannot be more than seven miles from the farmhouse where I grew up. I almost say, I knew it!

I don’t, but he looks over at me sharply, almost as if he caught my thought. Perhaps he did. I don’t believe in ESP, but I don’t entirely discount it, either.

“Don’t ever go there, Doc,” he says. “Don’t even look for it. Promise me.”

I give my promise. In fact, I haven’t been back to that broken-down part of Maine in over fifteen years. It’s close in miles, distant in desire. Thomas Wolfe made a characteristically sweeping statement when he titled his magnum opus *You Can’t Go Home Again*; it’s not true for everyone (Sister Sheila often goes back; she’s still close to several of her childhood friends), but it’s true for me. Although I suppose I’d title my own book *I Won’t Go Home Again*. What I remember are bullies with harelips dominating the playground, empty houses with staring glassless windows, junked-out cars, and skies that always seemed white and cold and full of fleeing crows.

“All right,” N. says, and bares his teeth for a moment at the ceiling. Not in aggression; it is, I’m quite sure, the expression of a man preparing to do a piece of heavy lifting that will leave him aching the next day. “I don’t know if I can express it very well, but I’ll do my best. The important thing to remember is that up til that day in August, the closest thing to OCD behavior I exhibited was popping back into the bathroom before going to work to make sure I’d gotten all the nose hairs.”

Maybe this is true; more likely it isn't. I don't pursue the subject. Instead, I ask him to tell me what happened that day. And he does.

For the next three sessions, he does. At the second of those sessions — June 15th — he brings me a calendar. It is, as the saying goes, Exhibit A.

3. N.'s Story

I'm an accountant by trade, a photographer by inclination. After my divorce — and the children growing up, which is a divorce of a different kind, and almost as painful — I spent most of my weekends rambling around, taking landscape shots with my Nikon. It's a film camera, not a digital. Toward the end of every year, I took the twelve best pix and turned them into a calendar. I had them printed at a little place in Freeport called The Windhover Press. It's pricey, but they do good work. I gave the calendars to my friends and business associates for Christmas. A few clients, too, but not many — clients who bill five or six figures usually appreciate something that's silver-plated. Myself, I prefer a good landscape photo every time. I have no pictures of Ackerman's Field. I took some, but they never came out. Later on I borrowed a digital camera. Not only did the pictures not come out, I fried the camera's insides. I had to buy a new one for the guy I borrowed it from. Which was all right. By then I think I would have destroyed any pictures I took of that place, anyway. If it allowed me, that is.

[I ask him what he means by "it." N. ignores the question as if he hasn't heard it.]

I've taken pictures all over Maine and New Hampshire, but tend to stick pretty much to my own patch. I live in Castle Rock — up on the View, actually — but I grew up in Harlow, like you. And don't look so surprised, Doc, I Googled you after my GP suggested you — everybody Googles everybody these days, don't they?

Anyway, that part of central Maine is where I've done my best work: Harlow, Motton, Chester's Mill, St. Ives, Castle-St.-Ives, Canton, Lisbon Falls. All along the banks of the mighty Androscoggin, in other words. Those pictures look more real, somehow. The '05 calendar's a good example. I'll bring you one and you can decide for yourself. January through April and September through December were all taken close to home. May through August are let's see Old

Orchard Beach Pemnaquid Point, the lighthouse, of course Harrison State Park and Thunder Hole in Bar Harbor. I thought I was really getting something at Thunder Hole, I was excited, but when I saw the proofs, reality came crashing back down. It was just another tourist-snap. Good composition, but so what, right? You can find good composition in any shitshop tourist calendar.

Want my opinion, just as an amateur? I think photography's a much artier art than most people believe. It's logical to think that, if you've got an eye for composition — plus a few technical skills you can learn in any photography class — one pretty place should photograph as well as any other, especially if you're just into landscapes. Harlow, Maine or Sarasota, Florida, just make sure you've got the right filter, then point and shoot. Only it's not like that. Place matters in photography just like it does in painting or writing stories or poetry. I don't know why it does, but

[There is a long pause.]

Actually I do. Because an artist, even an amateur one like me, puts his soul into the things he creates. For some people — ones with the vagabond spirit, I imagine — the soul is portable. But for me, it never seemed to travel even as far as Bar Harbor. The snaps I've taken along the Androscoggin, though those speak to me. And they do to others, too. The guy I do business with at Windhover said I could probably get a book deal out of New York, end up getting paid for my calendars rather than paying for them myself, but that never interested me. It seemed a little too I don't know public? Pretentious? I don't know, something like that. The calendars are little things, just between friends. Besides, I've got a job. I'm happy crunching numbers. But my life sure would have been dimmer without my hobby. I was happy just knowing a few friends had my calendars hung in their kitchens or living rooms. Even in their damn mudrooms. The irony is I haven't taken many pictures since the ones I took in Ackerman's Field. I think that part of my life may be over, and it leaves a hole. One that whistles in the middle of the night, as if there

was a wind way down inside. A wind trying to fill up what's no longer there. Sometimes I think life is a sad, bad business, Doc. I really do.

On one of my rambles last August, I came to a dirt road in Motton that I didn't remember ever seeing before. I'd just been riding, listening to tunes on the radio, and I'd lost track of the river, but I knew it couldn't be far, because it has a smell. It's kind of dank and fresh at the same time. You know what I'm talking about, I'm sure. It's an old smell. Anyway, I turned up that road.

It was bumpy, almost washed out in a couple of places. Also, it was getting late. It must have been around seven in the evening, and I hadn't stopped anywhere for supper. I was hungry. I almost turned around, but then the road smoothed out and started going uphill instead of down. That smell was stronger, too. When I turned off the radio, I could hear the river as well as smell it — not loud, not close, but it was there.

Then I came to a tree down across the road, and I almost went back. I could have, even though there was no place to turn around. I was only a mile or so in from Route 117, and I could have backed out in five minutes. I think now that something, some force that exists on the bright side of our lives, was giving me that opportunity. I think the last year would have been a lot different if I'd just thrown the transmission in reverse. But I didn't. Because that smell it's always reminded me of childhood. Also, I could see a lot more sky at the crest of the hill. The trees — some pine, mostly junk birch — drew back up there, and I thought, "There's a field." It occurred to me that if there was, it probably looked down on the river. It also occurred to me that there might be a good spot to turn around up there, but that was very secondary to the idea that I might be able to take a picture of the Androscoggin at sunset. I don't know if you remember that we had some spectacular sunsets last August, but we did.

So I got out and moved the tree. It was one of those junk birches, so rotted it almost came apart in my hands. But when I got back into my car, I still almost went back instead of forward. There really is a force on the bright side of things; I believe that. But it seemed like the

sound of the river was clearer with the tree out of the way — stupid, I know, but it really seemed that way — so I threw the transmission into low and drove my little Toyota 4Runner the rest of the way up.

I passed a little sign tacked to a tree. ACKERMAN'S FIELD, NO HUNTING, KEEP OUT, it said. Then the trees drew back, first on the left, then on the right, and there it was. It took my breath away. I barely remember turning off the car and getting out, and I don't remember grabbing my camera, but I must have, because I had it in my hand when I got to the edge of the field, with the strap and lens-bag knocking against my leg. I was struck to my heart and through my heart, knocked clean out of my ordinary life.

Reality is a mystery, Dr. Bonsaint, and the everyday texture of things is the cloth we draw over it to mask its brightness and darkness. I think we cover the faces of corpses for the same reason. We see the faces of the dead as a kind of gate. It's shut against us but we know it won't always be shut. Someday it will swing open for each of us, and each of us will go through.

But there are places where the cloth gets ragged and reality is thin. The face beneath peeps through but not the face of a corpse. It would almost be better if it was. Ackerman's Field is one of those places, and no damn wonder whoever owns it put up a KEEP OUT sign.

The day was fading. The sun was a ball of red gas, flattened at the top and bottom, sitting above the western horizon. The river was a long, bloody snake in its reflected glow, eight or ten miles distant, but the sound of it carrying to me on the still evening air. Blue-gray woods rose behind it in a series of ridges to the far horizon. I couldn't see a single house or road. Not a bird sang. It was as if I'd been tumbled back four hundred years in time. Or four million. The first white streamers of groundmist were rising out of the hay — which was high. Nobody had been in there to cut it, although that was a big field, and good graze. The mist came out of the darkening green like breath. As if the earth itself was alive.

I think I staggered a little. It wasn't the beauty, although it was beautiful; it was how everything that lay before me seemed thin, almost to the point of hallucination. And then I saw those damned rocks rising out of the uncut hay.

There were seven, or so I thought — the tallest two about five feet high, the shortest only three or so, the rest in between. I remember walking down to the closest of them, but it's like remembering a dream after it starts to decompose in the morning light — you know how they do that? Of course you do, dreams must be a big part of your workday. Only this was no dream. I could hear the hay whickering against my pants, could feel the khaki getting damp from the mist and starting to stick to my skin below the knees. Every now and then a bush — clumps of sumac were growing here and there — would pull my lens-bag back and then drop it again so it would thump harder than usual against my thigh.

I got to the nearest of the rocks and stopped. It was one of the five-footers. At first I thought there were faces carved in it — not human faces, either; the faces of beasts and monsters — but then I shifted my position a little and saw it was just a trick of the evening light, which thickens shadows and makes them look like well, like anything. In fact, after I stood in my new position for awhile, I saw new faces. Some of these looked human, but they were just as horrible. More horrible, really, because human is always more horrible, don't you think? Because we know human, we understand human. Or think we do. And these looked like they were either screaming or laughing. Maybe both at the same time.

I thought it was the quiet screwing with my imagination, and the isolation, and the bigness of it — how much of the world I could see laid out in front of me. And how time seemed to be holding its breath. As if everything would stay the way it was forever, with sunset not more than forty minutes away and the sun sitting red over the horizon and that faded clarity in the air. I thought it was those things that were making me see faces where there was nothing but coincidence. I think differently now, but now it's too late.

I snapped some pictures. Five, I think. A bad number, although I didn't know that yet. Then I stood back, wanting to get all seven of them in one picture, and when I framed the shot, I saw that there were really eight, standing in a kind of rough ring. You could tell — when you really looked, you could — that they were part of some underlying geological formation that had either poked out of the ground eons ago, or had maybe been exposed more recently by flooding (the field had a fairly steep downward slope, so I thought that was very possible), but they also looked planned, like stones in a Druid's circle. There was no carving in them, though. Except for what the elements had done. I know, because I went back in daylight and made sure of it. Chips and folds in the stone. No more than that.

I took another four shots — which makes a total of nine, another bad number, although slightly better than five — and when I lowered the camera and looked again with my naked eye, I saw the faces, leering and grinning and grunting. Some human, some bestial. And I counted seven stones.

But when I looked into the viewfinder again, there were eight.

I started to feel dizzy and scared. I wanted to be out of there before full dark came — away from that field and back on Route 117, with loud rock and roll on the radio. But I couldn't just leave. Something deep inside me — as deep as the instinct that keeps us drawing in breaths and letting them out — insisted on that. I felt that if I left, something terrible would happen, and perhaps not just to me. That sense of thinness swept over me again, as if the world was fragile at this particular place, and one person would be enough to cause an unimaginable cataclysm. If he weren't very, very careful.

That's when my OCD shit started. I went from stone to stone, touching each one, counting each one, and marking each in its place. I wanted to be gone — desperately wanted to be gone — but I did it and I didn't skimp the job. Because I had to. I knew that the way I know I have to keep breathing if I want to stay alive. By the time I got back to where I'd started, I was trembling and wet with sweat as well as mist and dew. Because touching those stones it

wasn't nice. It caused ideas. And raised images. Ugly ones. One was of chopping up my ex-wife with an axe and laughing while she screamed and raised her bloody hands to ward off the blows.

But there were eight. Eight stones in Ackerman's Field. A good number. A safe number. I knew that. And it no longer mattered if I looked at them through the camera's viewfinder or with my naked eyes; after touching them, they were fixed. It was getting darker, the sun was halfway over the horizon (I must have spent twenty minutes or more going around that rough circle, which was maybe forty yards across), but I could see well enough — the air was weirdly clear. I still felt afraid — there was something wrong there, everything screamed it, the very silence of the birds screamed it — but I felt relieved, too. The wrong had been put at least partly right by touching the stones and looking at them again. Getting their places in the field set into my mind. That was as important as the touching.

[A pause to think.]

No, more important. Because it's how we see the world that keeps the darkness beyond the world at bay. Keeps it from pouring through and drowning us. I think all of us might know that, way down deep. So I turned to go, and I was most of the way back to my car — I might even have been touching the doorhandle — when something turned me around again. And that was when I saw.

[He is silent for a long time. I notice he is trembling. He has broken out in a sweat. It gleams on his forehead like dew.]

There was something in the middle of the stones. In the middle of the circle they made, either by chance or design. It was black, like the sky in the east, and green like the hay. It was turning very slowly, but it never took its eyes off me. It did have eyes. Sick pink ones. I knew — my rational mind knew — that it was just light in the sky I was seeing, but at the same time I knew it was something more. That something was using that light. Something was using the sunset to see with, and what it was seeing was me.

[He's crying again. I don't offer him the Kleenex, because I don't want to break the spell. Although I'm not sure I could have offered them in any case, because he's cast a spell over me, too. What he's articulating is a delusion, and part of him knows it — "shadows that looked like faces," *etc.* — but it's very strong, and strong delusions travel like cold germs on a sneeze.]

I must have kept backing up. I don't remember doing it; I just remember thinking that I was looking at the head of some grotesque monster from the outer darkness. And thinking that where there was one, there would be more. Eight stones would keep them captive — barely — but if there were only seven, they'd come flooding through from the darkness on the other side of reality and overwhelm the world. For all I knew, I was looking at the least and smallest of them. For all I knew, that flattened snakehead with the pink eyes and what looked like great long quills growing out of its snout was only a baby.

It saw me looking.

The fucking thing grinned at me, and its teeth were heads. Living human heads.

Then I stepped on a dead branch. It snapped with a sound like a firecracker, and the paralysis broke. I don't think it's impossible that that thing floating inside the circle of stones was hypnotizing me, the way a snake is supposed to be able to do with a bird.

I turned and ran. My lens-bag kept smacking my leg, and each smack seemed to be saying Wake up! Wake up! Get out! Get out! I pulled open the door of my 4Runner, and I heard the little bell ding, the one that means you left your key in the ignition. I thought of some old movie where William Powell and Myrna Loy are at the desk of a fancy hotel and Powell rings the bell for service. Funny what goes through your mind at moments like that, isn't it? There's a gate in our heads, too — that's what I think. One that keeps the insanity in all of us from flooding our intellects. And at critical moments, it swings open and all kinds of weird shit comes flooding through.

I started the engine. I turned on the radio, turned it up loud, and rock music came roaring out of the speakers. It was The Who, I remember that. And I remember popping on the headlights. When I did, those stones seemed to jump toward me. I almost screamed. But there were eight, I counted them, and eight is safe.

[There's another long pause here. Almost a full minute.]

The next thing I remember, I was back on Route 117. I don't know how I got there, if I turned around or backed out. I don't know how long it took me, but The Who song was over and I was listening to The Doors. God help me, it was "Break On Through to the Other Side." I turned the radio off.

I don't think I can tell you any more, Doc, not today. I'm exhausted.

[And he looks it.]

[Next Session]

I thought the effect the place had had on me would dissipate on the drive home — just a bad moment out in the woods, right? — and surely by the time I was in my own living room, with the lights and TV on, I'd be okay again. But I wasn't. If anything, that feeling of dislocation — of having touched some other universe that was inimical to ours — seemed to be stronger. The conviction remained that I'd seen a face — worse, the suggestion of some huge reptilian body — in that circle of stones. I felt infected. Infected by the thoughts in my own head. I felt dangerous, too — as if I could summon that thing just by thinking about it too much. And it wouldn't be alone. That whole other cosmos would come spilling through, like vomit through the bottom of a wet paper bag.

I went around and locked all the doors. Then I was sure that I'd forgotten a couple, so I went around and checked them all again. This time I counted: front door, back door, pantry door, bulkhead door, garage overhead door, back garage door. That was six, and it came to me that six was a good number. Like eight is a good

number. They're friendly numbers. Warm. Not cold, like five or you know, seven. I relaxed a little, but I still went around one last time. Still six. "Six is a fix," I remember saying. After that I thought I'd be able to sleep, but I couldn't. Not even with an Ambien. I kept seeing the setting sun on the Androscoggin, turning it into a red snake. The mist coming out of the hay like tongues. And the thing in the stones. That most of all.

I got up and counted all the books in my bedroom bookcase. There were ninety-three. That's a bad number, and not just because it's odd. Divide ninety-three by three and you come out with thirty-one: thirteen backwards. So I got a book from the little bookcase in the hall. But ninety-four is only a little better, because nine and four add up to thirteen. There are thirteens everywhere in this world of ours, Doc. You don't know. Anyway, I added six more books to the bedroom case. I had to cram, but I got them in. A hundred is okay. Fine, in fact.

I was heading back to bed, then started wondering about the hall bookcase. If I'd, you know, robbed Peter to pay Paul. So I counted those, and that was all right: fifty-six. The numbers add to eleven, which is odd but not the worst odd, and fifty-six divides to twenty-eight — a good number. After that I could sleep. I think I had bad dreams, but I don't remember them.

Days went by, and my mind kept going back to Ackerman's Field. It was like a shadow had fallen over my life. I was counting lots of things by then, and touching things — to make sure I understood their places in the world, the real world, my world — and I'd started to place things, too. Always even numbers of things, and usually in a circle or on a diagonal line. Because circles and diagonals keep things out.

Usually, that is. And never permanently. One small accident and fourteen becomes thirteen, or eight becomes seven.

In early September, my younger daughter visited and commented on how tired I looked. She wanted to know if I was overworking. She

also noticed that all the living-room knickknacks — stuff her mom hadn't taken after the divorce — had been placed in what she called "crop circles." She said, "You're getting a little wiggy in your old age, aren't you, Dad?" And that was when I decided I had to go back to Ackerman's Field, this time in full daylight. I thought if I saw it in daylight, saw just a few meaningless rocks standing around in an uncut hayfield, I'd realize how foolish the whole thing was, and my obsessions would blow away like a dandelion puff in a strong breeze. I wanted that. Because counting, touching, and placing — those things are a lot of work. A lot of responsibility.

On my way, I stopped at the place where I got my pictures developed and saw the ones I'd taken that evening in Ackerman's Field hadn't come out. They were just gray squares, as if they'd been fogged by some strong radiation. That gave me pause, but it didn't stop me. I borrowed a digital camera from one of the guys at the photo shop — that's the one I fried — and drove out to Motton again, and fast. You want to hear something stupid? I felt like a man with a bad case of poison ivy going to the drugstore for a bottle of Calamine Lotion. Because that was what it was like — an itch. Counting and touching and placing could scratch it, but scratching affords only temporary relief at best. It's more likely to spread whatever's causing the itch. What I wanted was a cure. Going back to Ackerman's Field wasn't it, but I didn't know that, did I? Like the man said, we learn by doing. And we learn even more by trying and failing.

It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky. The leaves were still green, but the air had that brilliant clarity you only get when the seasons change. My ex-wife used to say that early fall days like that are our reward for putting up with the tourists and summer people for three months, standing in line while they use their credit cards to buy beer. I felt good, I remember that. I felt certain I was going to put all the crazy shit to rest. I was listening to a greatest-hits compilation by Queen and thinking how fine Freddie Mercury sounded, how pure. I sang along. I drove over the Androscoggin in Harlow — the water on either side of the old Bale Road Bridge bright enough to knock your eyes out — and I saw a fish jump. It made me laugh out loud. I

hadn't laughed like that since the evening in Ackerman's Field, and it sounded so good I did it again.

Then up over Boy Hill — I bet you know where that is — and past the Serenity Ridge Cemetery. I've taken some good photos in there, although I never put one in a calendar. I came to the dirt byroad not five minutes later. I started to turn in, then jammed on the brakes. Just in time, too. If I'd been any slower, I would have ripped my 4Runner's grille in two. There was a chain across the road, and a new sign hanging from it: ABSOLUTELY NO TRESPASSING.

Now I could have told myself it was just a coincidence, that the person who owned those woods and that field — not necessarily a guy named Ackerman, but maybe — put up that chain and that sign every fall, to discourage hunters. But deer season doesn't start until November first. Even bird season doesn't start til October. I think someone watches that field. With binocs, maybe, but maybe with some less normal form of sight. Someone knew I'd been there, and that I might be back.

"Leave it alone, then!" I told myself. "Unless you want to risk getting arrested for trespassing, maybe get your picture in the Castle Rock Call. That would be good for business, wouldn't it?"

But there was no way I was going to stop, not if there was a chance I could go up to that field, see nothing, and consequently feel better. Because — dig this — at the same time I was telling myself that if someone wanted me off his property I ought to respect that person's wishes, I was counting the letters in that sign and coming out with twenty-three, which is a terrible number, far worse than thirteen. I knew it was crazy to think that way, but I was thinking that way, and some part of me knew it wasn't a bit crazy.

I stashed my 4Runner in the Serenity Ridge parking lot, then walked back to the dirt road with the borrowed camera slung over my shoulder in its little zippered case. I went around the chain — it was easy — and walked up the road to the field. Turned out I would've had to walk even if the chain hadn't been there, because there were

half a dozen trees lying across the road this time, and not just trashwood birches. Five were good-sized pines, and the last one was a mature oak. They hadn't just fallen over, either; those babies had been dropped with a chainsaw. They didn't even slow me down. I climbed over the pines and detoured around the oak. Then I was on the hill climbing to the field. I barely gave the other sign — ACKERMAN'S FIELD, NO HUNTING, KEEP OUT — a glance. I could see the trees drawing back at the crest of the hill, I could see dusty beams of sun shining between the ones nearest the top, and I could see acres and acres of blue sky up there, looking jolly and optimistic. It was midday. There would be no giant riversnake bleeding in the distance, only the Androscoggin I grew up with and have always loved — blue and beautiful, the way ordinary things can be when we see them at their best. I broke into a run. My feeling of crazy optimism lasted all the way to the top, but the minute I saw those stones standing there like fangs, my good feelings fell away. What replaced them was dread and horror.

There were seven stones again. Just seven. And in the middle of them — I don't know just how to explain this so you'll understand — there was a faded place. It wasn't like a shadow, exactly, but more like you know how the blue will fade out of your favorite jeans over time? Especially at stress-points like the knees? It was like that. The color of the hay was washed to a greasy lime color, and instead of blue, the sky above that circle of stones looked grayish. I felt that if I walked in there — and part of me wanted to — I could punch out with one fist and tear right through the fabric of reality. And if I did, something would grab me. Something on the other side. I was sure of it.

Still, something in me wanted to do it. It wanted to I don't know quit the foreplay and get right to the fucking.

I could see — or thought I could, I'm still not sure about this part — the place where the eighth stone belonged, and I could see that that fadedness bulging toward it, trying to get through where the protection of the stones was thin. I was terrified! Because if it got out,

every unnamable thing on the other side would be born into our world. The sky would turn black, and it would be full of new stars and insane constellations.

I unslung the camera, but dropped it on the ground when I tried to unzip the bag it was in. My hands were shaking as if I was having some kind of seizure. I picked up the camera case and unzipped it, and when I looked at the stones again, I saw that the space inside them wasn't just faded anymore. It was turning black. And I could see eyes again. Peering out of the darkness. This time they were yellow, with narrow black pupils. Like cat's eyes. Or snake eyes.

I tried to lift the camera, but I dropped it again. And when I reached for it, the hay closed over it, and I had to tug it free. No, I had to rip it free. I was on my knees by then, yanking on the strap with both hands. And a breeze started to blow out of the gap where the eighth stone should have been. It blew the hair off my forehead. It stank. It smelled of carrion. I raised the camera to my face, but at first I could see nothing. I thought, It's blinded the camera, it's somehow blinded the camera, and then I remembered it was a digital Nikon, and you have to turn it on. I did that — I heard the beep — but I still could see nothing.

The breeze was a wind by then. It sent the hay rippling down the length of the field in big waves of shadow. The smell was worse. And the day was darkening. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, it was pure blue, but the day was darkening, just the same. As if some great invisible planet was eclipsing the sun.

Something spoke. Not English. Something that sounded like "Cthun, cthun, deeyanna, deyanna." But then Christ, then it said my name. It said, "Cthun, N., deeyanna, N." I think I screamed, but I'm not sure, because by then the wind had become a gale that was roaring in my ears. I should have screamed. I had every right to scream. Because it knew my name! That grotesque, unnamable thing knew my name. And then the camera do you know what I realized?

[I ask him if he left the lens cap on, and he utters a shrill laugh that runs up my nerves and makes me think of rats scampering over broken glass.]

Yes! Right! The lens cap! The fucking lens cap! I tore it off and raised the camera to my eye — it's a wonder I didn't drop it again, my hands were shaking so badly, and the hay never would have let it go again, no, never, because the second time it would have been ready. But I didn't drop it, and I could see through the viewfinder, and there were eight stones. Eight. Eight keeps things straight. That darkness was still swirling in the middle, but it was retreating. And the wind blowing around me was diminishing.

I lowered the camera and there were seven. Something was bulging out of the darkness, something I can't describe to you. I can see it — I see it in my dreams — but there are no words for that kind of blasphemy. A pulsing leather helmet, that's as close as I can get. One with yellow goggles on each side. Only the goggles I think they were eyes, and I know they were looking at me.

I raised the camera again, and saw eight stones. I snapped off six or eight shots as if to mark them, to fix them in place forever, but of course that didn't work, I only fried the camera. Lenses can see those stones, Doc — I'm pretty sure a person could see them in a mirror, too, maybe even through a plain pane of glass — but they can't record them. The only thing that can record them, hold them in place, is the human mind, the human memory. And even that's undependable, as I've found out. Counting, touching, and placing works for awhile — it's ironic to think that behaviors we consider neurotic are actually holding the world in place — but sooner or later whatever protection they offer decays. And it's so much work.

So damn much work.

I wonder if we could be done for today. I know it's early, but I'm very tired.

[I tell him I will prescribe a sedative, if he wants — mild, but more reliable than Ambien or Lunesta. It will work if he doesn't overdo it. He gives me a grateful smile.]

That would be good, very good. But can I ask you a favor?

[I tell him that of course he can.]

Prescribe either twenty, forty, or sixty. Those are all good numbers.

[Next Session]

[I tell him he looks better, although this is far from true. What he looks like is a man who will be institutionalized soon, if he doesn't find a way to get back to his personal Highway 117. Turn around or back up, it doesn't matter which, but he has to get away from that field. So do I, actually. I've been dreaming about N.'s field, which I'm sure I could find if I wanted to. Not that I do — that would be too much like sharing my patient's delusion — but I'm sure I could find it. One night this weekend (while I was having trouble finding sleep myself), it occurred to me that I must have driven past it, not just once but hundreds of times. Because I've been over the Bale Road Bridge hundreds of times, and past Serenity Ridge Cemetery thousands of times; that was on the school-bus route to James Lowell Elementary, where Sheila and I went. So sure, I could find it. If I wanted to. If it exists.

[I ask if the prescription helps, if he's been sleeping. The dark circles under his eyes tell me he hasn't been, but I'm curious to hear how he responds.]

Much better. Thanks. And the OCD's a little better, too.

[As he says this, his hands — more prone to tell the truth — are stealthily placing the vase and the Kleenex box at opposing corners of the table by the couch. Today Sandy has put out roses. He arranges them so they link the box and the vase. I ask him what

happened after he went up to Ackerman's Field with the borrowed camera. He shrugs.]

Nothing. Except of course I paid for the photo-shop guy's Nikon. Pretty soon it really was hunting season, and those woods get dangerous, even if you're wearing blaze orange from head to toe. Although I somehow doubt if there are many deer in that area; I imagine they steer clear.

The OCD shit smoothed out, and I started sleeping through the night again.

Well some of the nights. There were dreams, of course. In the dreams I was always in that field, trying to pull the camera out of the hay, but the hay wouldn't let go. The blackness spilled out of the circle like oil, and when I looked up I saw the sky had cracked open from east to west and a terrible black light was pouring out light that was alive. And hungry. That's when I'd wake up, drenched with sweat. Sometimes screaming.

Then, in early December, I got a letter at the office. It was marked PERSONAL with a small object inside. I tore it open and what fell out onto my desk was a little key with a tag on it. The tag said A.F. I knew what it was, and what it meant. If there'd been a letter, it would have said, "I tried to keep you out. It's not my fault, and maybe not yours, but either way this key, and all it opens, is yours now. Take good care of it."

That weekend I drove back out to Motton, but I didn't bother parking in the lot at Serenity Ridge. I didn't need to anymore, you see. The Christmas decorations were up in Portland and the other small towns I passed along the way. It was bitterly cold, but there wasn't any snow yet. You know how it's always colder just before the snow comes? That's how it was that day. But the sky was overcast, and the snow did come, a blizzard that very night. It was a big one. Do you remember?

[I tell him I do. I have reason to remember (although I don't tell him this). Sheila and I were snowed in at the home place, where we'd gone to check on some repair work. We got squiffy and danced to old Beatles and Rolling Stones records. It was pleasant.]

The chain was still across the road, but the A.F. key fit the lock. And the downed trees had been hauled to one side. As I'd known they would be. It was no good blocking the road anymore, because that field is now my field, those stones are now my stones, and whatever it is they're keeping in is my responsibility.

[I ask him if he was frightened, sure the answer must be yes. But N. surprises me.]

Not much, no. Because the place was different. I knew it even from the end of the road, where it T's into 117. I could feel it. And I could hear crows cawing as I opened the lock with my new key. Ordinarily I think that's an ugly sound, but that day it sounded very sweet. At the risk of sounding pretentious, it sounded like redemption.

I knew there'd be eight stones in Ackerman's Field, and I was right. I knew they wouldn't look so much like a circle, and I was right about that, too; they looked like random outcroppings again, part of the underlying bedrock that had been exposed by a tectonic shift, or a withdrawing glacier eighty thousand years ago, or a flood of more recent vintage.

I understood other things, too. One was that I had activated the place just by looking at it. Human eyes take away the eighth stone. A camera lens will put it back, but won't lock it in place. I had to keep renewing the protection with symbolic acts.

[He pauses, thinking, and when he speaks again he seems to have changed the subject.]

Did you know that Stonehenge may have been a combination clock and calendar?

[I tell him I've read this somewhere.]

The people who built that place, and others like it, must have known they could tell time with no more than a sundial, and as for the calendar — we know that prehistoric people in Europe and Asia told the days simply by making marks on sheltered rock walls. So what does that make Stonehenge, if it is a gigantic clock/calendar? A monument to OCD behavior, that's what I think — a gigantic neurosis standing in a Salisbury field.

Unless it's protecting something as well as keeping track of hours and months. Locking out an insane universe that happens to lie right next door to ours. I have days — many of them, especially last winter, when I felt pretty much like my old self again — when I'm sure that's bullshit, that everything I thought I saw in Ackerman's Field was in my own head. That all this OCD crap is just a mental stutter.

Then I have other days — they started again this spring — when I'm sure it's all true: I activated something. And in so doing, I became the latest baton carrier in a long, long line of them, maybe going all the way back to prehistoric times. I know that sounds crazy — why else would I be telling it to a psychiatrist? — and I have whole days when I'm sure it is crazy even when I'm counting things, going around my house at night touching light switches and stove burners, I'm sure it's all just you know bad chemicals in my head that a few of the right pills will fix.

I especially thought that last winter, when things were good. Or at least better. Then, in April of this year, things started getting bad again. I was counting more, touching more, and placing just about everything that wasn't nailed down in circles or diagonals. My daughter — the one who's going to school near here — again expressed concerns about how I looked and how jumpy I seemed. She asked if it was the divorce, and when I said it wasn't, she looked as if she didn't believe me. She asked if I'd consider "seeing someone," and by God, here I am.

I started having nightmares again. One night in early May I woke on my bedroom floor, screaming. In my dream I'd seen a huge gray-black monstrosity, a winged gargoyle-thing with a leathery head like a helmet. It was standing in the ruins of Portland, a thing a mile high at least — I could see wisps of cloud floating around its plated arms. There were screaming people struggling in its taloned fists. And I knew — knew — it had escaped from the standing stones in Ackerman's Field, that it was only the first and least of the abominations to be released from that other world, and it was my fault. Because I had failed in my responsibilities.

I stumbled through the house, putting things in circles and then counting them to make sure the circles contained only even numbers, and it came to me that I wasn't too late, that it had only started to come awake.

[I ask him what he means by "it."]

The force! Remember Star Wars? "Use the force, Luke"?

[He laughs wildly.]

Except this is a case of don't use the force! Stop the force! Imprison the force! The chaotic something that keeps driving at that thin place — and all the thin places of the world, I imagine. Sometimes I think there's a whole chain of ruined universes behind that force, stretching back untold eons in time like monstrous footprints

[He says something under his breath that I don't catch. I ask him to repeat, but he shakes his head.]

Hand me your pad, Doc. I'll write it. If what I'm telling you is true and not just in my fucked-up head, it's not safe to say the name aloud.

[He prints CTHUN in large capital letters. He shows it to me, and when I nod, he tears the sheet to shreds, counts the shreds — to make sure the number is even, I suppose — and then deposits them in the wastebasket near the couch.]

The key, the one I got in the mail, was in my home safe. I got it out and drove back to Motton — over the bridge, past the cemetery, up that damned dirt track. I didn't think about it, because it wasn't the sort of decision you have to consider. It would be like sitting down to consider whether or not you should put out the drapes in your living room if you came in and saw them on fire. No — I just went.

But I took my camera. You better believe that.

My nightmare woke me at five or so, and it was still early morning when I got to Ackerman's Field. The Androscoggin was beautiful — it looked like a long silver mirror instead of a snake, with fine tendrils of mist rising from its surface and then spreading above it in a, I don't know, temperature inversion, or something. That spreading cloud exactly mimicked the river's bends and turns, so it looked like a ghost-river in the sky.

The hay was growing up in the field again, and most of the sumac bushes were turning green, but I saw a scary thing. And no matter how much of this other stuff is in my head (and I'm perfectly willing to acknowledge it might be), this was real. I've got pictures that show it. They're foggy, but in a couple you can see the mutations in the sumac bushes closest to the stones. The leaves are black instead of green, and the branches are twisted they seem to make letters, and the letters seem to spell you know its name.

[He gestures to the wastebasket where the shreds of paper lie.]

The darkness was back inside the stones — there were only seven, of course, that's why I'd been drawn out there — but I saw no eyes. Thank God, I was still in time. There was just the darkness, turning and turning, seeming to mock the beauty of that silent spring morning, seeming to exult in the fragility of our world. I could see the Androscoggin through it, but the darkness — it was almost Biblical, a pillar of smoke — turned the river to a filthy gray smear.

I raised my camera — I had the strap around my neck, so even if I dropped it, it wouldn't fall into the clutch of the hay — and looked

through the viewfinder. Eight stones. I lowered it and there were seven again. Looked through the viewfinder and saw eight. The second time I lowered the camera, it stayed eight. But that wasn't enough, and I knew it. I knew what I had to do.

Forcing myself to go down to that ring of stones was the hardest thing I've ever done. The sound of the hay brushing against the cuffs of my pants was like a voice — low, harsh, protesting. Warning me to keep away. The air began to taste diseased. Full of cancer and things that are maybe even worse, germs that don't exist in our world. My skin began to thrum, and I had an idea — truth is, I still have this idea — that if I stepped between two of those stones and into the circle, my flesh would liquefy and go dripping off my bones. I could hear the wind that sometimes blows out of there, turning in its own private cyclone. And I knew it was coming. The thing with the helmet-head.

[He gestures again to the scraps in the wastebasket.]

It was coming, and if I saw it this close up, it would drive me mad. I'd end my life inside that circle, taking pictures that would show nothing but clouds of gray. But something drove me onward. And when I got there, I

[N. stands up and walks slowly around the couch in a deliberate circle. His steps — both grave and prancing, like the steps of a child playing ring-a-rosie — are somehow awful. As he circles, he reaches out to touch stones I cannot see. One two three four five six seven eight. Because eight keeps things straight. Then he stops and looks at me. I have had patients in crisis — many — but I have never seen such a haunted stare. I see horror, but not insanity; I see clarity rather than confusion. It must all be a delusion, of course, but there can be no doubt that he understands it completely.

[I say, "When you got there, you touched them."]

Yes, I touched them, one after the other. And I can't say I felt the world grow safer — more solid, more there — with every stone I

touched, because that wouldn't be true. It was every two stones. Just the even numbers, do you see? That turning darkness began to recede with each pair, and by the time I got to eight, it was gone. The hay inside the stones was yellow and dead, but the darkness was gone. And somewhere — far off — I heard a bird sing.

I stepped back. The sun was fully up by then, and the ghost-river over the real one had entirely disappeared. The stones looked like stones again. Eight granite outcroppings in a field, not even a circle, unless you worked to imagine one. And I felt myself divide. One part of my mind knew the whole thing was just a product of my imagination, and that my imagination had some kind of disease. The other part knew it was all true. That part even understood why things had gotten better for awhile.

It's the solstice, do you see? You see the same patterns repeated all over the world — not just at Stonehenge, but in South America and Africa, even the Arctic! You see it in the American midwest — my daughter even saw it, and she knows nothing about this! Crop circles, she said! It is a calendar — Stonehenge and all the others, marking not just days and months but times of greater and lesser danger.

That split in my mind was tearing me apart. Is tearing me apart. I've been out there a dozen more times since that day, and on the twenty-first — the day of the appointment with you I had to cancel, do you remember?

[I tell him I do, of course I do.]

I spent that whole day in Ackerman's Field, watching and counting. Because the twenty-first was the summer solstice. The day of highest danger. Just as the winter solstice in December is the day when the danger is lowest. It was last year, it will be again this year, it has been every year since the beginning of time. And in the months ahead — until fall, at least — I've got my work cut out for me. The twenty-first I can't tell you how awful it was out there. The way that eighth stone kept shimmering out of existence. How hard it was

to concentrate it back into the world. The way the darkness would gather and recede gather and recede like the tide. Once I dozed off and when I looked up there was an inhuman eye — a hideous three-lobed eye — looking back at me. I screamed, but I didn't run. Because the world was depending on me. Depending on me and not even knowing it. Instead of running, I raised my camera and looked through the viewfinder. Eight stones. No eye. But after that I stayed awake.

Finally the circle steadied, and I knew I could go. At least for that day. By then the sun was setting again, as it had on the first evening; a ball of fire sitting on the horizon, turning the Androscoggin into a bleeding snake.

And Doc — whether it's real or just a delusion, the work is just as hard. And the responsibility! I'm so tired. Talk about having the weight of the world on your shoulders

[He's back on the couch again. He is a big man, but now he looks small and shriveled. Then he smiles.]

At least I'll get a break come winter. If I make it that far. And you know what? I think we've finished, you and I. As they used to say on the radio, "This concludes today's program." Although who knows? You may see me again. Or at least hear from me.

[I tell him on the contrary, we have a lot more work to do. I tell him he is carrying a weight; an invisible eight-hundred-pound gorilla on his back, and that together we can persuade it to climb down. I say we can do it, but it will take time. I say all these things, and I write him two prescriptions, but in my heart I fear that he means it; he's done. He takes the prescriptions, but he's done. Perhaps only with me; perhaps with life itself.]

Thank you, Doc. For everything. For listening. And those?

[He points to the table beside the couch, with its careful arrangement.]

I wouldn't move them, if I were you.

[I give him an appointment card, and he tucks it carefully away in his pocket. And when he pats the pocket with his hand to make sure it's safe, I think perhaps I am wrong, and I will actually see him on July 5th. I have been wrong before. I have come to like N., and I don't want him to step into that ring of stones for good. It only exists in his mind, but that doesn't mean it's not real.]

[Final Session Ends]

4. Dr. Bonsaint's Manuscript (Fragmentary)

July 5, 2007

I called his home phone number when I saw the obituary. Got C., the daughter who goes to school here in Maine. She was remarkably composed, saying that in her heart she was not surprised. She told me she was the first to arrive at N.'s Portland home (her summer job is in Camden, not that far distant), but I could hear others in the house. That's good. The family exists for many reasons, but its most basic function may be to draw together when a member dies, and that is particularly important when the death is violent and unexpected — murder or suicide.

She knew who I was. Talked freely. Yes, it was suicide. His car. The garage. Towels laid along the bottoms of the doors, and I am sure an even number of them. Ten or twenty; both good numbers, according to N. Thirty not so good, but do people — especially men living on their own — have as many as thirty towels in their homes? I'm pretty sure they don't. I know I don't.

There will be an inquest, she said. They will find drugs — the very ones I prescribed, I have no doubt — in his system, but probably not in lethal amounts. Not that it matters, I suppose; N. is just as dead, no matter what the cause.

She asked me if I would come to the funeral. I was touched. To the point of tears, in fact. I said I would, if the family would have me. Sounding surprised, she said of course they would why not?

"Because in the end I couldn't help him," I said.

"You tried," she said. "That's the important thing." And I felt the stinging in my eyes again. Her kindness.

Before hanging up, I asked her if he left a note. She said yes. Three words. Am so tired.

He should have added his name. That would have made four.

July 7, 2007

At both the church and cemetery, N.'s people — especially C. — took me in and made me welcome. The miracle of family, which can open its circle even at such critical times. Even to take in a stranger. There were close to a hundred people, many from the extended family of his professional life. I wept at the graveside. Am neither surprised nor ashamed: identification between analyst and patient can be a powerful thing. C. took my hand, hugged me, and thanked me for trying to help her father. I told her she was welcome, but I felt like an imposter, a failure.

Beautiful summer day. What mockery.

Tonight I have been playing the tapes of our sessions. I think I will transcribe them. There is surely at least an article in N.'s story — a small addition to the literature of obsessive-compulsive disorder — and perhaps something larger. A book. Yet I am hesitant. What holds me back is knowing I'd have to visit that field, and compare N.'s fantasy to the reality. His world to mine. That the field exists I am quite sure. And the stones? Yes, probably there are stones. With no meaning beyond those his compulsions lent them.

Beautiful red sunset this evening.

July 17, 2007

I took the day off and went out to Motton. It has been on my mind, and in the end I saw no reason not to go. I was “dither-dathering,” our mother would have said. If I intend to write up N.'s case, such dither-dathering must stop. No excuses. With markers from my childhood to guide me — the Bale Road Bridge (which Sheila and I used to call, for reasons I can no longer remember, the Fail Road Bridge), Boy Hill, and especially the Serenity Ridge Cemetery — I thought I would find N.'s road without too much trouble, and I did.

There could be little question, because it was the only dirt track with a chain across it and a NO TRESPASSING sign.

I parked in the cemetery lot, as N. had done before me. Although it was a bright hot summer midday, I could hear only a few birds singing, and those very distant. No cars passed on Route 117, only one overloaded pulp-truck that went droning past at seventy miles an hour, blowing my hair back from my forehead in a blast of hot air and oily exhaust. After that it was just me. I thought of childhood walks taken to the Fail Road Bridge with my little Zebco fishing rod propped on my shoulder like a soldier's carbine. I was never afraid then, and told myself I wasn't afraid on this day.

But I was. Nor do I count that fear as completely irrational. Back-trailing a patient's mental illness to its source is never comfortable.

I stood at the chain, asking myself if I really wanted to do this — if I wanted to trespass, not just on land that wasn't mine, but on an obsessive-compulsive fantasy that had very likely killed its possessor. (Or — this is probably closer — its possessor.) The choice didn't seem as clear as it had in the morning, when I put on my jeans and old red hiking boots. This morning it seemed simple: "Go out and compare the reality to N.'s fantasy, or give up the idea of the article (or book)." But what is reality? Who am I to insist that the world perceived by Dr. B.'s senses is more "real" than that which was perceived by those of the late Accountant N.?

The answer to that seemed clear enough: Dr. B. is a man who has not committed suicide, a man who does not count, touch, or place, a man who believes that numbers, whether odd or even, are just numbers. Dr. B. is a man who is able to cope with the world. Ultimately, Accountant N. was not. Therefore, Dr. B.'s perception of reality is more viable than Accountant N.'s.

But once I was there, and sensed the quiet power of the place (even at the foot of the road, while still outside the chain), it occurred to me that the choice was really much simpler: walk up that deserted road to Ackerman's Field or turn around and walk back down the blacktop

to my car. Drive away. Forget the possible book, forget the rather more probable article. Forget N. and get on with my own life.

Except. Except.

Driving away might (I only say might) mean that on some level, one deep in my subconscious, where all the old superstitions still live (going hand in hand with all the old red urges), I had accepted N.'s belief that Ackerman's Field contains a thin place protected by magic ringstones, and that if I were to go there, I might re-activate some terrible process, some terrible struggle, which N. felt his suicide could halt (at least temporarily). It would mean I had accepted (in that same deep part of me where we are all nearly as similar as ants toiling in an underground nest) the idea that I was to be the next guardian. That I had been called. And if I gave in to such notions

"My life would never be the same." I said that aloud. "I could never look at the world in the same way."

All at once the business seemed very serious. Sometimes we drift, do we not? Into places where the choices are no longer simple, and the consequences of picking the wrong option become grave. Perhaps life-or sanity-threatening.

Or what if they aren't choices at all? What if they only look like choices?

I pushed the idea aside and squeezed past one of the posts holding the chains. I have been called a witch-doctor both by patients and (jokingly, I assume) by my peers, but I had no wish to think of myself that way; to look at myself in the shaving-mirror and think, There is a man who was influenced at a critical moment not by his own thought-processes but by a dead patient's delusion.

There were no trees across the road, but I saw several — birches and pines, mostly — lying in the ditch on the uphill side. They might have fallen this year and been dragged aside, or last year, or the year before. It was impossible for me to tell. I'm no woodsman.

I came to a rising hill and saw the woods pull away on either side, opening a vast stretch of hot summer sky. It was like walking into N.'s head. I stopped halfway up the hill, not because I was out of breath, but to ask myself one final time if this was what I wanted. Then I continued on.

I wish I hadn't.

The field was there, and the view opening to the west was every bit as spectacular as N. had suggested — breathtaking, really. Even with the sun high and yellow instead of sitting red above the horizon. The stones were there, too, about forty yards down the slope. And yes, they do suggest circularity, although they are in no sense the sort of circle one sees at Stonehenge. I counted them. There were eight, just as N. said.

(Except when he said there were seven.)

The grass inside that rough grouping did look a bit patchy and yellow compared to the thigh-high greenery in the rest of the field (it stretches down to a wide acreage of mixed oaks, firs, and birches), but it was by no means dead. What caught my attention closer by was a little cluster of sumac bushes. Those weren't dead, either — at least I don't think so, but the leaves were black instead of green-streaked-with-red, and they had no shape. They were ill-formed things, somehow hard to look at. They offended the order the eye expected. I can't put it any better than that.

About ten yards down from where I stood, I saw something white caught in one of those bushes. I walked toward it, saw it was an envelope, and knew N. had left it for me. If not on the day of his suicide, then not long before. I felt a terrible sinking in my stomach. A clear sense that in deciding to come here (if I did decide), I had made the wrong choice. That I had been certain to make the wrong choice, in fact, having been educated to trust my intellect over my instincts.

Rubbish. I know I shouldn't be thinking this way.

Of course (here's a point!), N. knew, too, and went on thinking that way just the same. No doubt counting the towels even as he prepared for his own

To make sure it was an even number.

Shit. The mind gets up to funny tricks, doesn't it? Shadows grow faces.

The envelope was wrapped in a clear plastic Baggie to keep it dry. The printing on the front was perfectly firm, perfectly clear: DR. JOHN BONSAINT.

I took it out of the Baggie, then looked down the slope at the stones again. Still eight. Of course there were. But not a bird sang, not a cricket creaked. The day held its breath. Every shadow was carved. I know now what N. meant about feeling cast back in time.

There was something in the envelope; I could feel it sliding back and forth, and my fingers knew it for what it was even before I tore off the end of the envelope and dumped it into the palm of my hand. A key.

Also a note. Just two words. Sorry, Doc. And his name, of course. First name only. That makes three words, in all. Not a good number. At least according to N.

I put the key in my pocket and stood beside a sumac bush that didn't look like a sumac bush — black leaves, branches twisted until they almost looked like runes, or letters

Not CTHUN!

and decided, Time to leave. That's enough. If something has mutated the bushes, some environmental condition that's poisoned the ground, so be it. The bushes are not the important part of this landscape; the stones are the important part. There are eight. You have tested the world and found it as you hoped it would be, as you knew it would be, as it always was. If this field seems too quiet —

fraught, somehow — that is undoubtedly the lingering effect of N.'s story on your own mind. Not to mention his suicide. Now go back to your life. Never mind the silence, or the sense — in your mind like a thundercloud — that something is lurking in that silence. Go back to your life, Dr. B.

Go back while you still can.

I returned to the end of the road. The high green hay whickering against my jeans like a low, gasping voice. The sun beating on my neck and shoulders.

I felt an urge to turn and look again. Strong urge. I fought it and lost.

When I turned around I saw seven stones. Not eight, but seven. I counted them twice to make sure. And it did seem darker inside the stones, as if a cloud had passed over the sun. One so small it made shade only in that place. Only it didn't look like a shadow. It looked like a particular darkness, one that was moving over the yellow, matted grass, circling in on itself and then belling out again toward the gap where, I was sure (almost sure; that's the hell of it) an eighth stone had been standing when I arrived.

I thought, I have no camera to look through and make it come back.

I thought, I have to make this stop while I can still tell myself nothing is happening. Right or wrong, I was less concerned with the fate of the world than with losing hold of my own perceptions; losing hold of my idea of the world. I did not believe in N.'s delusion for even a moment, but that darkness

I didn't want it to get a foothold, do you see? Not even a toehold.

I had put the key back into the torn envelope and tucked the envelope into my hip pocket, but I was still holding the Baggie. Without really thinking about what I was doing, I raised it in front of my eyes and looked at the stones through it. They were a little distorted, a little bleary even when I pulled the plastic tight, but still

clear enough. There were eight again, right enough, and that perceived darkness

That funnel

Or tunnel

was gone. (Of course it was never there to begin with.) I lowered the Baggie — not without some trepidation, I admit it — and looked at the stones dead-on. Eight. Solid as the foundation of the Taj Mahal. Eight.

I walked back down the road, successfully fighting the compulsion to take one more look. Why look again? Eight is eight. Let's get that straight. (My little joke.)

I have decided against the article. Best to put the whole business of N. behind me. The important thing is that I actually went there, and faced — I am quite sure this is true — the insanity that is in all of us, the Dr. B.'s of the world as well as the N.'s. What did they call it in WWI? "Going to see the elephant." I went to see the elephant, but that does not mean I have to draw the elephant. Or in my case write a description of the elephant.

And if I thought I saw more? If for a few seconds

Well, yes. But wait. That only shows the strength of the delusion that captured poor N. Explains his suicide in a way no note can. Yet some things are best left alone. This is probably just such a case. That darkness

That funnel-tunnel, that perceived —

In any case, I'm done with N. No book, no article. "Turn the page." The key undoubtedly opens the lock on the chain at the end of the road, but I'll never use it. I threw it away.

"And so to bed," as the late great Sammy Pepys used to say.

Red sun tonight, sailor's delight shining over that field. Mist rising from the hay? Perhaps. From the green hay. Not the yellow.

The Androscoggin will be red tonight, a long snake bleeding in a dead birth canal. (Fancy!) I would like to see that. For whatever reason. I admit it.

This is just tiredness. It will be gone tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning I may even want to reconsider the article. Or the book. But not tonight.

And so to bed.

July 18, 2007

Fished the key out of the trash this morning and put it in my desk drawer. Throwing it away seems too much like admitting something might be. You know.

Well. And anyway: it's just a key.

July 27, 2007

All right, yes, I admit it. I have been counting a few things and making sure there are even numbers around me. Paper clips. Pencils in the jar. Things of that nature. Doing this is strangely soothing. I have caught N.'s cold for sure. (My little joke, but not a joke.)

My mentor-psychiatrist is Dr. J. in Augusta, now Chief of Staff at Serenity Hill. I called him and we had a general discussion — which I framed as research for a paper I might deliver this winter at the Chicago convention — a lie, of course, but sometimes, you know, it's easier to — about the transitive nature of OCD symptoms, from patient to analyst. J. confirmed my own researches. The phenomena isn't common, but it's not a complete rarity, either.

He said, "This doesn't have any personal concern for you, Johnny, does it?"

Keen. Perceptive. Always was. And has lots of info about yours truly!

"No," I said. "I've just gotten interested in the subject. In fact, it's become something of a compulsion."

We ended the conversation laughing and then I went to the coffee table and counted the books there. Six. That's good. Six is a fix. (N.'s little rhyme.) I checked my desk to make sure the key was there and of course it is, where else would it be? One key. Is one good or bad? "The cheese stands alone," you know. Probably not germane, but something to think about!

I started out of the room, then remembered there were magazines on the coffee table as well as books and counted those, as well. Seven! I took the People with Brad Pitt on the cover and threw it in the trash.

Look, if it makes me feel better, what harm? And it was only Brad Pitt!

And if this gets worse, I will come clean with J. This is a promise I make to myself.

I think a Neurontin scrip might help. Although it's an anti-seizure medication, strictly speaking, in cases like mine it's been known to help. Of course

August 3, 2007

Who am I kidding? There are no cases like this, and Neurontin doesn't help. Tits on a bull.

But counting helps. Strangely soothing. And something else. The key was on the wrong side of the drawer I put it in! That was intuition but intuition is not to be SNEEZED AT. I moved it. Better. Then put

another key (safe-deposit box) on the other side. Seems to balance it. Six is a fix but two is true (joke). Good sleep last night.

Well, no. Nightmares. The Androscoggin at sunset. A red wound. A birth canal. But dead.

August 10, 2007

Something is wrong out there. The eighth stone is weakening. There is no sense telling myself this isn't so, because every nerve in my body — every cell in my skin!! — proclaims it's true. Counting books (and shoes, yes, that's true, N.'s intuition and not to be "sneezed at") helps, but does not fix THE BASIC PROBLEM. Not even Placing Diagonals helps too much, although it certainly

Toast crumbs on the kitchen counter, for instance. You line them up with the blade of a knife. Line of sugar on the table, HA! But who knows how many crumbs? How many grains of sugar? Too many to count!!

This must end. I'm going out there.

I will take a camera.

August 11, 2007

The darkness. Dear Christ. It was almost complete. And something else.

The darkness had an eye.

August 12

Did I see anything? Actually?

I don't know. I think I did, but I don't know.

There are 23 words in this entry.

26 is better.

August 19

I picked up the phone to call J., tell him what's going on with me, then put it down. What would I tell him? Besides: 1-207-555-1863=11. A bad number.

Valium helps more than Neurontin. I think. As long as I don't overdue it

Sept 16

Back from Motown. Covered with sweat. Shaking. But eight again. I fixed it. !! Fixed it! IT! Thank God. But

But!

I cannot live my life this way.

No, but — I WAS JUST IN TIME. IT WAS ON THE VERGE OF GETTING OUT. The protections only hold so long and then a house-call is necessary! (My little joke.)

I saw the 3-lobed eye N. spoke of. It belongs to nothing from this world or this universe.

It is trying to eat its way thru.

Except I don't accept this. I let N.'s obsession get a finger in my psyche (it's playing stinkyfinger with me if you get my little joke) and it has continued to widen the gap, slipping in a second finger, a third, a whole pulling hand. Opening me up. Opening up my

But!

I saw with my own eyes. There is a world behind this world, filled with monsters

Gods

HATEFUL GODS!

One thing. If I kill myself, what? If it's not real, the torment still ends. If it is real, the eighth stone out there solidifies again. At least until someone else — the next "CARETAKER" — goes heedlessly prospecting up that road and sees

Makes suicide almost look good!

October 9, 2007

Better lately. My ideas seem more my own. And when I last went out to Ackerman's Field (2 days ago), my worries were all for naught. There were 8 stones there. I looked at them — solid as houses — and saw a crow in the sky. It swerved to avoid the airspace over the stones, "ziss is true," (joke) but it was there. And as I stood at the end of the road with my camera hung over my neck (nix pix in Motton stix, those stones don't photograph, N. was right about that much, anyway; possibly radon??), I wondered how I ever could have thought there were only 7. I admit that I counted my steps back to my car (and then paced around a little when an odd number brought me to the driver's door), but these things do not let go all at once. They are CRAMPS in the MIND! Yet maybe

Do I dare hope I'm getting better?

October 10, 2007

Of course there is another possibility, loath as I am to admit it: that N. was right about the solstices. We are moving away from one and toward the other now. Summer gone; winter ahead. Which, if true, is good news only in the short term. If I should have to deal with such wracking mental spasms next spring and the spring after that

I couldn't, that's all.

How that eye haunts me. Floating in the gathering darkness.

Other things behind it

CTHUN!

November 16, 2007

Eight. Always were. I'm sure now. Today the field was silent, the hay dead, the trees at the foot of the slope bare, the Androscoggin gray steel beneath an iron sky. The world waiting for snow.

And my God, best of all: a bird roosting on one of those stones!

A BIRD!

Realized only when I was driving back to Lewiston that I didn't bother counting my steps when going back to the car.

Here is the truth. What must be the truth. I caught a cold from one of my patients, but now I'm getting better. Cough gone, sniffles drying up.

The little joke was on me all along.

December 25, 2007

I shared Christmas dinner and the ritual exchange of presents with Sheila and her family. When Don took Seth to the candlelight ritual at the church (I'm sure the good Methodists would be shocked if they knew the pagan roots of such rites), Sheila squeezed my hand and said, "You're back. That's good. I was worried."

Well, you can't fool your own flesh and blood, it seems. Dr. J. may only have suspected something was wrong, but Sheila knew. Dear Sheila.

"I had a sort of crisis this summer and fall," I said. "A crisis of the spirit, you might call it."

Although it was more a crisis of the psyche. When a man begins to think the only purpose served by his perceptions is to mask the knowledge of terrible other worlds — that is a crisis of the psyche.

Sheila, always practical, said: “As long as it wasn’t cancer, Johnny. That’s what I was afraid of.”

Dear Sheila! I laughed and hugged her.

Later on, while we were doing a final polish on the kitchen (and sipping eggnog), I asked her if she remembered why we used to call the Bale Road Bridge the Fail Road Bridge. She cocked her head and laughed.

“It was your old friend who thought that up. The one I had such a crush on.”

“Charlie Keen,” I said. “I haven’t seen him in a dog’s age. Except on TV. The poor man’s Sanjay Gupta.”

She whacked my arm. “Jealousy doesn’t become you, dear. Anyway, we were fishing from the bridge one day — you know, with those little poles we all had — and Charlie peered over the side and said, ‘You know, anyone who fell off this thing could not fail to kill themselves.’ It just struck us funny, and we laughed like maniacs. You don’t remember that?”

But then I did. Bale Road Bridge became Fail Road Bridge from that day on. And what old Charlie said was true enough. Bale Stream is very shallow at that point. Of course it flows into the Androscoggin (probably you can see the merging-point from Ackerman’s Field, although I never noticed), which is a lot deeper. And the Androscoggin flows to the sea. World leads onto world, doesn’t it? Each deeper than the last; this is a design all the earth proclaims.

Don and Seth came back in, Sheila’s big guy and her little guy, all dusted with snow. We had a group hug, very New Age, and then I

drove home listening to Christmas carols. Really happy for the first time in ever so long.

I believe these notes this diary this chronicle of madness avoided (perhaps by bare inches, I think I really did almost “go over the bridge”) can end now.

Thank God, and merry Christmas to me.

April 1, 2008

It's April Fool's, and the fool is me. I woke from a dream of Ackerman's Field.

In it the sky was blue, the river was a darker blue in its valley, the snow was melting, the first green grass was poking through the remaining ribbons of white, and once more there were only seven stones. Once more there was darkness in the circle. Only a smudge for now, but it will deepen unless I take care of it.

I counted books after waking (sixty-four, a good number, even and divisible all the way down to 1 — think about it), and when that didn't turn the trick I spilled coffee onto the kitchen counter and made a diagonal. That fixed things — for now — but I will have to go out there and make another “house call.” Must not dither-dather.

Because it's starting again.

The snow is almost gone, the summer solstice is approaching (still over the horizon but approaching), and it has started again.

I feel

God help me, I feel like a cancer patient who has been in remission and wakes one morning to discover a big fat lump in his armpit.

I can't do this.

I must do this.

[Later]

There was still snow on the road, but I got up to “AF” all right. Left my car in the cemetery parking lot and walked. There were indeed only seven stones, as in my dream. Looked thru the viewfinder of my camera. 8 again. 8 is fate and keeps the world strait. Good deal.

For the world!

Not such a good deal for Dr. Bonsaint.

That this should be happening again; my mind groans at the prospect.

Please God don't let it be happening again.

April 6, 2008

Took longer today to make 7 into 8, and I know I have much “long distance” work ahead of me, *i.e.* counting things and making diagonals and — not placing, N. was wrong about that — it's balancing that needs to be done. It's simbolic, like the break and whine in communion.

I'm tired, though. And the solstitch is so far away.

Its still gathering its power and the solstit is so far away.

I wish N. had dyed before coming into my office. That selfish bastiard.

May 2, 2008

I thought it would kill me this time. Or break my mind. Is my mind broken? My God how can I tell? There is no God, there can be no God in the face of that darkness, and the EYE that peers from it. And something else.

THE THING WITH THE HELMET HEAD. BORN OUT OF LIVING UNSANE DARKNESS.

There was chanting. Chanting from deep inside the ringstones, deep inside the darkness. But I made 7 into 8 once again, although it took a long long long lung long time. Many loox thru the vufinder, also making circles and counting paces, widening the circle to 64 paces and that did it, thank god. "The widening gyre" — Yeets! Then I looked up. Looked around. And saw its name woven into every sumac bush and every tree at the foot of that hellish field: Cthun, Cthun, Cthun, Cthun. I looked into the sky for releef and saw the clods spelling it out as they traversed the blue: CTHUN in the sky. Looked at the river and saw its curves spell out a giant C. C for Cthun.

How can I be responsible for the world? How can this be?

Its not fare!!!!!!!

May 4, 2008

If I can close the door by killing myself

And the peace, even if it is only the peece of oblitsion

I am going out there again, but this time not all the way. Just to the Fail Road Bridge. The water there is shallow, the bed lined with rocks.

The drop must be 30 feet.

Not the best number but still

Anyone who falls off that thing cannot fail to

Cannot fail

I cant stop thinking about that hideous 3-lobe eye

The thing with the helmet head

The screaming faces in the stones

CTHUN!

[Dr. Bonsaint's manuscript ends here.]

5. The Second Letter

June 8, 2008

Dear Charlie,

I haven't heard from you about Johnny's manuscript, and that is good. Please ignore my last letter, and if you still have the pages, burn them. That was Johnny's request, and I should have honored it myself.

I told myself I was only going out as far as the Fail Road Bridge — to see the place where we all had so many happy times as kids, the place where he ended his life when the happy times ran out. I told myself it might bring closure (that's the word Johnny would have used). But of course the mind under my mind — where, I'm sure Johnny would claim, we are all pretty much alike — knew better. Why else did I take the key?

Because it was there, in his study. Not in the same drawer where I found the manuscript, but in the top one — the one above the kneehole. With another key to "balance it," just as he said.

Would I have sent you the key with the manuscript, if I'd found them both in the same place? I don't know. I don't. But I'm glad, on the whole, at the way things turned out. Because you might've been tempted to go out there. Simple curiosity might have drawn you, or possibly something else. Something stronger.

Or possibly that's so much bullshit. Possibly I only took the key and went out to Motton and found that road because I am what I said I was in my first letter: a daughter of Pandora. How can I tell for sure? N. couldn't. Neither could my brother, not even at the very end, and as he used to say, "I'm a professional, don't try this at home."

In any case, don't worry about me. I'm fine. And even if I'm not, I can do the math. Sheila LeClaire has 1 husband and 1 child. Charlie

Keen — according to what I read in Wikipedia — has 1 wife and 3 children. Hence, you have more to lose. And besides, maybe I never got over that crush I had on you.

Under no circumstances come back here. Keep doing your reports on obesity and prescription drug abuse and heart attacks in men under 50 and things like that. Normal things like that.

And if you haven't read that manuscript (I can hope for this, but doubt it; I'm sure Pandora also had sons), ignore that, too. Put all this down to a woman hysterical over the unexpected loss of her brother.

There's nothing out there.

Just some rocks.

I saw with my own eyes.

I swear there's nothing out there, so stay away.

6. The Newspaper Article

[From the Chester's Mill Democrat: June 1, 2008]

WOMAN JUMPS FROM BRIDGE, MIMICS BROTHER'S SUICIDE

By Julia Shumway

MOTTON — After prominent psychiatrist John Bonsaint committed suicide by jumping from the Bale River Bridge in this little central Maine town a little over a month ago, friends said that his sister, Sheila LeClaire, was confused and depressed. Her husband, Donald LeClaire, said she was “totally devastated.” No one, he went on, thought she was contemplating suicide.

But she was.

“Although there was no note,” County Coroner Richard Chapman said, “all the signs are there. Her car was parked neatly and considerately off the road on the Harlow side of the bridge. It had been locked, and her purse was on the passenger seat, with her driver's license laid on top.” He went on to say that LeClaire's shoes were found on the railing itself, placed carefully side by side. Chapman said only an inquest would show if she drowned or died on impact.

In addition to her husband, Sheila LeClaire leaves a seven-year-old son. Services have not yet been set.

7. The E-Mail

keen1981

3:44 PM

June 5 '08

Chrissy —

Please cancel all appointments for the next week. I know this is short notice, and I know how much flak you are going to catch, but it cannot be helped. There is a matter I have to tend to back home in Maine. Two old friends, brother and sister, have committed suicide under peculiar circumstances and in the same f — king place! Given the extremely odd manuscript the sister sent me before copying (apparently copying) her brother's suicide, I believe this bears investigation. The brother, John Bonsaint, was my best friend when I was growing up; we saved each other from more than a few schoolyard beatings!

Hayden can do the blood-sugar story. I know he thinks he can't, but he can. And even if he can't, I have to go. Johnny and Sheila were close to family.

And besides: I don't mean to be a Philistine about it, but there might be a story in this. On obsessive-compulsive disorder. Not as big a blip on the radar as cancer, maybe, but sufferers will tell you it's still some mighty scary shit.

Thanx, Chrissy —

Charlie