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GOIN' TO GRACELAND

a book by Eustace F. Pendleby

Introduction

At the end of July 2006, I went on a road trip to Memphis, Tennessee, with two friends of mine, Matt and Mikael. By the time we left Memphis to come back to Nashville, I had written seventeen pages in a spiral notebook, documenting our activities during the second day of our two-day trip. What began as a drug-fueled, facetious attempt at gonzo journalism for our own amusement quickly became the notes of what was, at the time, the most terrifying experience of my life. Before I address the notebook's contents and the events that occurred following the notebook's final entry, some background information should be mentioned.

I was living and going to school in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, a college town about thirty miles southeast of Nashville. I was unemployed for the summer. My mom was paying for my rent and tuition, and she was giving me a substantial allowance. Matt was unemployed, as well, although he always had plenty of money, and he was living in Nashville. Matt and I had been close friends in high school until our senior year, four years earlier, when we had a falling-out. We began talking again at the beginning of the summer of 2006 and had been hanging out regularly since. Matt asked me to go with him to Memphis for a two-night Widespread Panic concert, and he offered to cover all expenses. Matt also claimed he had a friend who would be at the show and have two vials of LSD from San Francisco waiting for us when we got there. I accepted Matt's invitation, and we planned to leave the afternoon of Friday the 29th.

The night before we left, I ate psilocybin mushrooms and went to a hip-hop show at a bar in Murfreesboro. I dropped by the after party and then went back to my apartment with a girlfriend, and we had sex for a while. I then talked to my friend Nick on the phone and persuaded him to drive to my apartment instead of continue aimlessly driving drunk around Murfreesboro. He came over and I cooked us all couscous. We passed out just before sunrise. I woke up at eleven and drove to Nashville by myself to pick up another friend, Nate, from the airport.

Nate and I went to my mom's house, in downtown Nashville, and I let Nate drive my car back to his car, which was at my apartment, and waited at my mom's for Matt. Matt arrived after a short time and told me Mikael, a friend of his, was coming with us to Memphis. I did not know Mikael very well, having hung out with him only a couple times. He and Matt had been good friends for a few years. We picked up Mikael from his house and left Nashville early in the afternoon in Matt's white 1996 Ford Explorer. Matt did not bring his contact lenses with him, and because of this, he did not drive for the rest of the trip. Mikael drove the whole way to Memphis, and I promised to return the favor and drive on the way back home. During the three-hour drive to Memphis, I drew in a sketchpad, and we smoked a joint, listened to music, and talked.

We got to the concert too late for the preshow parking-lot party, where we had hoped to purchase drugs, and we did not bring any drugs with us except for the joint we had already smoked. The show was held at the Mid-South Coliseum, an old auditorium near downtown Memphis. There was an abandoned wooden roller coaster in the parking lot. We went inside and bought tickets for the show, and then we unexpectedly ran into three old friends with whom Matt and I had gone to high school: Erin, Lauren, and Draper. We stayed with them through the concert.

At intermission, Matt and I met up with his friend that supposedly had the acid, but he did not have the acid or seem hopeful about getting it. He did, however, have some MDMA. Matt and I both ingested ample doses and then returned to our seats. After the concert, we looked around the parking lot for people selling drugs. Mikael purchased a few grams of cocaine and an eighth of decent weed.

Erin, Lauren, and Draper had checked into a Knights Inn not far from the auditorium, and they had taken a cab from the hotel to get to the show. We gave them a ride back and went to their room to hang out, and not long after we got there, the people staying in the room next to us came over and introduced themselves. They were three hippies from Alabama, two guys and a girl, and they were also in town for the Widespread show and happened to have a batch of peanut butter mushroom brownies, a half-ounce of excellent weed, and a sheet of plain white perforated blotter acid. We paid them for a brownie, half of their weed, and twenty hits of acid. Matt, Mikael, and I each took a hit of the acid.

Around midnight, our friends from high school told us they did not feel like staying for the second night's show and were driving back to Nashville in the morning. They went to sleep and we got a room for ourselves.

In our room, we watched television and did some blow, and I drew and wrote in my sketchpad. We soon found out, as the hippies from Alabama had told us, that the acid was exceptionally strong. The hippies from Alabama came to our room around two in the morning, and we all talked and drank beer and smoked weed. After a while, one of the hippies said he had forgotten about "it," and then he left the room. He came back a few minutes later with a handmade cardboard cutout of the word *it* — capital I and capital T. "It" was painted white and its edges were outlined in black marker. The

hippies stayed in our room for a couple of hours, and before they went back to their room, they gave “it” to us. They said that someone had given “it” to them and that it would only be fair to pass “it” on to us. They also allowed each of us to choose a Grateful Dead sticker from their impressive collection. I put mine on my sketchpad’s front cover.

They left, and Mikael tried to fall asleep. Matt and I decided to stay awake. Matt and I had a great time the rest of the morning. There was a point when we shared a twenty-minute-long, continuous giggle fit.

As dawn approached, Matt and I had the idea to go to Graceland. We called 4-1-1 several times to ask for the number to Graceland, but every time except for the last, we could not stop laughing long enough to ask. Matt finally succeeded, but the operator said he could not find the number. Matt had it on speakerphone. The operator sounded like he had never heard of Graceland.

I had never been to Graceland, but Matt had been somewhat recently and thought it opens at eight a.m. We left the hotel around eight thirty, and before we did, we drank more beer, did more blow, and smoked a joint. And Matt paid for another night at the hotel. Along with the sketchpad, I had brought a spiral notebook with us on the trip, and I decided to bring it with us to Graceland and use it to chronicle the day's proceedings. The prospect of being in a public tourist area on an assortment of drugs evoked thoughts of Hunter S. Thompson and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

Mikael stayed at the hotel to catch up on sleep. Matt and I cleaned out the Explorer, removing from the vehicle the drug paraphernalia and discarding the empty beer bottles and other trash into a dumpster. We were, after all, in a city neither of us knew well, highly intoxicated, and about to drive somewhere we did not even know how to get to. We wanted as little trouble as possible if we were pulled over by the police.

I drove us to a gas station, and we got cigarettes and asked the gas station attendant for directions to a place where we could get breakfast. The attendant told us we should go to a nearby restaurant, CK's Steak and Eggs. In the gas station's parking lot, I wrote the notebook's first entry as a brief preface: "The people of this city do not trust themselves. We will do them one better and trust ourselves, despite every rational impulse telling us to do otherwise. This will all be thoroughly documented."

We found CK's, but it was more of a sit-down establishment than we had expected. There were also a lot of old people inside. The camouflage pants Matt was wearing were markedly ripped on both legs, and the rip on one leg went near the crotch. We opted for a Burger King across the street instead. To document this, I wrote in the notebook: "CK for BK." In hindsight, it was an appropriate switch, as we were going to Graceland, home of the King. We went through the drive-thru and got two coffees and three orders of hash browns.

We kept driving down the same road CK's and Burger King were on, hoping to find a place for Matt to buy pants. We eventually came to Elvis Presley Boulevard and turned left, assuming Graceland would be somewhere on this road. We soon found a Wal-Mart and went inside, and Matt bought a pair of white basketball shorts. We got back on Elvis Presley Boulevard and went the other direction, passing by the road CK's and Burger King were on. We found Graceland a few miles down the road.

This is when I truly started to keep account of our activities in the notebook. This is where the real story begins. The notebook's text is presented here, in its entirety, with minor alterations. Explanatory notes are included in brackets as needed.

Chapter One: Graceland

My red-bearded compatriot and I have arrived at the Graceland parking lot. In the car, with the windows down, we're listening to music and smoking cigarettes. We both take another hit of acid.

"It sure is swarthy out," — me.

"Very swarthy. Very," — my compatriot.

[We walked from the parking lot to the Graceland Plaza's main entrance. The Graceland Plaza is directly across the street from the Graceland estate and consists of gift shops, restaurants, and a ticket building. We had to walk across a small bridge over a stream on the way there.]

The stream smells like us...bad.

There are gift shops and diners. We order two coffees and two bacon, egg, and cheese sandwiches at Rockabilly's Diner. When asked, the cook and cashier, an old black lady, tells us that the best thing to see at Graceland is the whole thing.

"Blue suede breakfast," — my red-bearded compatriot.

The bacon, egg, and cheeses are delicious. But they may prove to be more trouble than the worth of their deliciousness.

"I'm not sure this is going to sit well," — Red Beard.

“This must be documented thoroughly. Thoroughly documented. All of it.

Thoroughly,” — me.

“Thoroughly. Of course,” — Red Beard.

“They don't allow smoking on the tour,” — Red Beard.

“You've gotta be fucking kidding me,” — me.

“Nope,” — my compatriot.

“It could get even swarthier,” — me.

“Definitely swarthier,” — Red Beard.

[Matt and I had started saying the word *swarthy* while driving to Graceland, and we used the word to describe the hot and humid weather. The sky was clear and the sun was bright. We assumed *swarthy* had no real meaning. We thought we had made it up.]

I spill the rest of my coffee on the way to the trashcan. I get some napkins and clean it up while my compatriot takes a pee. On our way out, I spot “Weird Al” Yankovic's autographed picture, which is hung amongst the other celebrity photographs covering the diner's walls.

In the ticket building, the morning crowd has shuffled in — a disenchanting mass doling out cash to the more-than-willing employees. These people are in a line that wraps around a velvet rope line-establishing device. “KNOW ELVIS,” demands a backlit Graceland poster next to the ticket line. The ancient carpet's swirling colors dance rhythmically for us, my compatriot and me, to some inaudible rockabilly beat.

“It's just a big, long expanse of nothing,” — a fat lady in khaki capris and a striped

pastel sleeveless button-up shirt.

“We can help someone over here,” — elderly attendant with short silver hair and an official-looking vest. She has a soothing voice.

[The dialogue was originally written as seen. I would transcribe the speech promptly, so as not to forget exactly what was said, and then I would write down who said what. This style had quickly become habit for me. We made our way from the ticket building to the shuttle-bus waiting area and sat on a bench.]

There is an unexpected hitch in our plans. We must wait forty-five minutes until the shuttle bus picks us up. This may be the nail in our coffin. I can only imagine what our mental states will be by the time we board the bus.

God help us. Or at least me.

“Was that a man or a woman, by the way?” — my red-bearded compatriot.

His new white basketball shorts purchased from Wal-Mart this morning are fitting, and they are wrinkled. They offer somewhat more discretion than the tremendously ripped camo pants he was wearing before. His oversized Corona flip-flops and tinted aviators counter that discretion with further indiscretion.

I'm afraid our showers may not have improved our appearances. Also, we smell of beer, weed, cigarettes, and Speed Stick.

[We were both already sweating profusely from the heat and drugs. I had a healthy growth of stubble and Matt had a fairly full, scraggly beard. My shaggy brown hair was constrained by a white bandana, and I was wearing a light-blue T-shirt, blue

jeans with holes in them, and tennis shoes. Matt's short red hair was uncovered and sticking out in odd ways. As mentioned, he was wearing sunglasses. I didn't have any sunglasses with me.]

My compatriot is wearing a Pink Floyd T-shirt with a pink pig on it.

The people around us are too amazing for me to describe here. To do them justice would require a song or a poem, like Gil Scott-Heron's "Bicentennial Blues" or T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

"That's a long time to wait," — my currently unpseudonymed compatriot.

[In the spirit of Hunter S. Thompson and Raoul Duke, I wanted to create false names for us, if only to superficially enhance the experience.]

The acid is definitely taking hold of him. I can sense it in his mannerisms. He is fighting off the urge to giggle, and I know this.

"I am tripping my motherfucking balls off," — Red Beard.

"Yes. I have documented it," — I, Sergio.

"My face just fell off," — Red Beard.

"I have to take the biggest motherfucking shit," — Red Beard.

"You might want to get that under control," — I, Sergio.

"I think it might be easier if I just wear a diaper," — Red Beard.

The drugs are wearing on my ability to stay focused. I must keep to the task at hand, or things may soon get out of hand. I have the hiccups. Too many uppers — coffee, coke. And I guess the acid is a little speedy. It's damn potent stuff. The ole one-hit

blunder.

“Enjoy this cigarette. It may be our last for a while,” — Sergio.

“I just chain smoked, like, six of ‘em,” — Red Beard.

Our ticket time is called and we go to stand in line. Our picture is taken in front of a wall painted to look like Graceland’s front gate. Large fans circulate the humidity and old-lady perfume.

“And there’s your pseudonym: Gunther Khan. Or should I say Sir Gunther Khan?” — I, Sergio.

[There was an announcement over the loud speaker for what sounded like someone named Gunther Khan to report somewhere for something.]

“Well, you’re L.L. Coolbean the Eighth then,” — Gunther.

“Okay then,” — L.L.

Our shuttle arrives. I have to piss something fierce.

“Thoroughly documented. Thoroughly, thoroughly documented,” — L.L.

“Thoroughly,” — Gunther.

“That bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich is being thoroughly digested,” — Gunther.

“Not so thoroughly for me,” — L.L.

“I think it’s on strike,” — Gunther.

We sit in the back of the bus. Out of the way of the others. They seem so nervous. All of them. The kids, parents, grandparents, and noncategorables all seem befuddled by their outwardly simple audio devices. We wisely opted to forgo the audio equipment and were rewarded with badges displaying our lack of audio equipment.

“You’d think they could just see we don’t have audio equipment,” — L.L.

The shuttle bus stops once we are across the street.

“That’s his bedroom on the top right. Nobody’s allowed up there except for the family. Nobody’s allowed on the top floor except for the family,” — my compatriot.

The first tour guide babbles on about useless facts. Elvis was twenty-two when he bought this hunk of junk.

No smoking on the whole goddam tour.

The foyer is unimpressive. A gaudy chandelier opens into a dining room and a living room. There is some half-assed stained glass of peacocks or some shit. A bunch of TVs. The security cameras in the corners of the ceiling do their job: They make me feel secure.

“Hmm. It looks like my grandmother’s house,” — L.L., as we step into the kitchen.

[The kitchen leads into the Jungle Room.]

The Jungle Room is similar to what I expected. The ceilings are low. I certainly expected to be unimpressed. My main thoughts on the Jungle Room have to do with the jungle sex that must have occurred here.

The stairway to the basement has mirrors on its slanted ceiling. The mirrors continue into a blue and yellow monstrosity with a white monkey on a mirror/table. Next room is the best yet: the pool table room. The ceiling and the walls are covered with pleated, ornate fabric.

More green carpet — on the walls and ceiling now. Back upstairs. Into the Jungle

Room. Fur-covered seats are in front of a small pool of water, and water is trickling down into the pool from the stone wall behind it.

“He like monkeys,” — the fat lady behind me.

Definitely serious monkey sex.

My compatriot feels that the heat is already on us. Sooner than expected. He says they are speaking in security code that they should “keep an eye on us.”

That girl in the pink shirt and jean skirt is too young for me to even write about legally.

“Definitely swarthy,” — L.L.

We step outside and then inside again to the King’s tiny office/shooting-range. Elvis must have been short. We step back outside. The horses in his field seem sad — almost as sad as the visitors being herded along. My compatriot brings my attention to a keep-off-grass sign. We snicker. We decide to skip the trophy room.

“Fucking gay,” — Gunther.

[“Fucking gay” here is in reference to the trophy room. Matt, having been to Graceland before, had seen the trophy room and thought it was a waste of time.]

His pool is now to our right and his racquetball building is to our left. Okay landscaping. The pool is kept very clean. The living room in his racquetball building contains leather sofas and an upright piano. The racquetball court has been converted into a showcase for his gold and platinum records. The King’s tacky jumpsuits are also on display. Gunther just tripped over some audio equipment’s wire that was hanging between a mother and her son. Gunther has caused quite a spectacle. We walk outside.

There is a ghetto on the other side of the estate's fence.

"How crazy would it be to have a house next to Graceland?" — Gunther.

A loud noise from the ghetto.

"I think that was a gunshot. That was a gunshot," — L.L.

"Yes. That was a gunshot," — Gunther.

We laugh.

"Hold on. I have to write this down," — L.L.

I lean against a wall and write it down.

"Thoroughly documented," — L.L.

"Thoroughly," — Gunther.

A few more muffled gunshot-like noises.

"This city is trying to kill us," — L.L.

"You got the keep-off-grass part, right?" — Gunther.

"Thoroughly," — L.L.

We walk past the pool to a large fountain area. This is apparently where the King is buried.

"Check out that guy's shirt!" — Gunther, pointing out a red and yellow tie-dye T-shirt on a gentleman with his wife and children. Gunther is laughing uncontrollably. The acid has us by our balls. We are sitting on a concrete wall and debating whether or not to wander into the "pointless" trophy room after all.

"I need a cigarette and a bathroom," — Gunther.

[There are no public restrooms on the tour.]

“I have to shit so bad it hurts. And I’m wearing white shorts. Pretty soon you’re going to be writing a story about me cleaning up my own feces,” — Gunther.

And so we leave Graceland.

Back to another shuttle-bus waiting area to go back across the street again. But this is only the beginning of our trip into the beating heart of Memphis.

The lady asks everyone to organize their audio equipment and says it will be taken once we get back across the street. My tripping compatriot must really have to shit. He is squirming with anticipation. We recheck our itinerary on the bus ride back.

[In the hotel room earlier, Matt and I had written down a list of things to do for that day, which included getting Matt new pants, going to Graceland, seeing the Memphis Pyramid downtown, and playing Tekken at a mall arcade.]

Our shuttle-bus driver is more messed up than either of us. I give him my final farewell.

“Farewell, good sir,” — L.L.

We give the people our no-audio-equipment badges, and I lecture them on how it would be more efficient to simply observe that we don’t have any audio equipment. My compatriot purchases our picture that was taken earlier. In the photo, we are shaking hands and have absurdly goofy grins on our stoned, coked-out, tripping, sleep-deprived faces.

I sit outside the Chrome Grille at a glass-top table and smoke cigarettes while Sir Gunther Khan takes his dump inside the diner. An old lady inside eyes me suspiciously. My throat is extremely dry. I must procure water. I am sweating like a stuck pig.

“I smell like a wet hotdog,” — Gunther.

As noontime approaches, it grows swarthier still. I feel we will need to consume more drugs soon. We have been able to maintain somewhat sober facades up until this point — perhaps too well.

“It’s the swarthiest. Maybe the swarthiest it’s ever been,” — Gunther.

We pass by a restaurant called Rock and Roll Forever. It has closed down. We cross back over the smelly stream. In the parking lot, a middle-aged woman checks out my fucked-up companion and me.

“Why is there a lifeguard tower in the parking lot?” — Gunther.

“Good question,” — L.L.

“Thoroughly,” — Gunther.

We discuss what to do next as he brings out wads of cash from his pockets. The plan: go back to the hotel, do more coke, tell Mikael about Graceland, go to Beale Street, and see the Pyramid — a bastion of Freemason symbolism.

[In downtown Memphis, on the bank of the Mississippi River, there is a 32-story stainless-steel pyramid that was originally constructed to house a sports and entertainment complex. I had developed a fascination with the Freemasons the previous summer, and I had spent a considerable amount of time researching the secret society. The reverse of the Great Seal of the United States, on the back of the one-dollar bill, is the familiar image of a partly completed pyramid with the all-seeing eye hovering above it. Some sources state that this image has Masonic significance, and so-called conspiracy theorists often allege that elusive connections exist between the Freemasons and the pyramids of ancient Egypt. Also, Memphis is

the name of an ancient Egyptian capital city. I was intrigued by all of this and desired to see the Pyramid in person.]

“I’m sorry. What was the question?” — Gunther.

Chapter Two: The Mall Parking Lot

“We forgot it. Damn it,” — L.L.

“Let’s get out of this swarthinness,” — Gunther.

[We left Graceland and went by a gas station to get orange juice. At the gas station, we realized we had forgotten to bring the cardboard “it” with us to Graceland. We left the gas station, and on the way back to the hotel, we stopped at a shopping mall to find a Tekken arcade machine. Sitting in the Explorer, in the mall’s parking lot, we noticed that the only people we could see entering and exiting the mall were African Americans.]

My compatriot is showing signs of pussying out. We are going to trudge through, though. Like the soldiers we are.

[I tried to convince Matt that we should go into the mall. Although neither Matt nor I held racial prejudices, he did not feel comfortable about going inside.]

Or are not. We leave the mall. To return later.

Chapter Three: Back in the Hotel Room

My red-bearded compatriot and I are back at the hotel, doing lines and pumping ourselves up for our next outing into the swarthinness.

“It looks like a hard gust of wind grabbed me there,” — Gunther, showing me our Graceland picture.

What is in Gunther’s hand in the photo? The world may never know. He is saying the OJ is making him mucousy. I tell him it isn’t.

“We should go soon,” — L.L.

“The next line has to be, ‘Well, we’re calling the wheelchair people on the way,’” — Gunther.

[This is unclear from the text, but effectively, Matt was saying he was so inebriated that he would need a wheelchair to go anywhere else.]

“Do you switch off nostrils or not?” — L.L.

[This is in reference to snorting cocaine. I was relatively inexperienced with the drug, having only done small quantities of it on a few random occasions.]

“Yeah. You do. Well, I don’t know. I guess I’m lying. Sometimes I do, sometimes I

don't," — Gunther.

"Yeah. I guess everybody has their bitch nostril," — L.L.

"This just may yet get swarthier," — L.L.

"We can only hope," — Gunther.

My compatriot takes another bump and takes another dump, and we are on our way.

Chapter Four: The Cotton Museum

“We’ve got it in the bag,” — L.L.

[This time, we brought the cardboard “it” with us in a plastic grocery bag that we had some other items in.]

I start the car after it’s already started, and it goes *rererror*.

“Off to a good start,” — Gunther.

[It took about twenty minutes to drive downtown from our hotel, near the airport, and despite the drugs and my unfamiliarity with the city, I got us downtown, via the interstate, without a problem. Although Matt had been to Memphis recently, since he did not have his contact lenses with him on our trip, the navigation was left up to me. Mikael had decided to stay at the hotel again. When we arrived downtown, I parked in the fourth story of a parking garage a few blocks from the riverfront.]

“Let’s get swarthy,” — L.L.

“What a good pen holder — the bagel,” — L.L.

I grab my pen out of the bagel in the center console and start writing.

“Can I have more acid?” — L.L.

“Yes,” — Gunther.

He takes some more, too.

[We each took another hit.]

“Bring it,” — L.L.

“Tape it to the book,” — Gunther.

[With black electrical tape, we affixed the cardboard “it” to the back of the notebook.]

The parking garage is big and confusing. All of the spaces are reserved.

[The reason we parked on the fourth floor was not because the bottom three were full. Rather, most of the bottom three floors' parking spaces were empty, but they were marked as reserved. On a return visit to Memphis, I discovered a sign that was in plain view from the parking garage's entrance, explaining that reserved spaces are open to the public on weekends. We locked the Explorer and went into a stairwell in the parking garage.]

“Wow. This place is — *BOOM* — clear,” — L.L.

[Once we had entered the stairwell, the door to the stairwell percussively slammed shut behind us.]

“Why does the exit always have to be the scariest place possible? Who’s going first?” — Gunther.

[We walked down the stairwell and exited through a door at the bottom onto the sidewalk.]

“I don’t think it’s as swarthy as it was before,” — Gunther.

Sirens blare down the streets as we walk them in the swarthy sun.

“We are going to the Cotton Museum. That’s the most blasphemous goddam thing in the motherfucking world — a cotton museum in downtown Memphis,” — L.L.

[Walking toward the riverfront from the parking garage, we came across the Cotton Museum, and I felt the presence of a cotton museum in Memphis was racist, as I knew of the city’s sizable impoverished black community. Memphis is also the city in which Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. We walked inside and bought tickets, and I chatted with the woman at the ticket counter.]

“Lots of old money here,” — L.L.

“Yes. Most definitely,” — Tami Smith (from Nebraska). Museum has been open since March.

[Tami Smith told me that, historically, cotton is the principal cause of Memphis’ thriving as a city. Memphis’ geographic location makes the city an immensely profitable river port, and Memphis grew as a direct result of increased cotton

production in the Southern United States during what is considered to be a darker time in American history. The cotton industry was, of course, wholly dependent on African American slave labor and, following the Civil War, more subtle forms of enslavement, such as sharecropping. At this point in the notebook, I decided to take notes more so than keep a detailed account of our activities, as I wanted to be able to attentively observe all that was happening. Before going into the museum, Matt and I agreed to pose as journalists from my university's newspaper. This is how we introduced ourselves to Tami Smith and to the museum hostess. The Cotton Museum is on the ground floor of the Memphis Cotton Exchange building. The Memphis Cotton Exchange is a regional regulatory agency for cotton trading and is also the museum's chief sponsor. The hostess directed us to a viewing area, where we watched an introductory movie shown on a large flat-panel display, in front of which were a few rows of wooden chairs.]

Movie: *Memphis Cotton Exchange and Memphis Cotton Museum*

1874 — Cotton Exchange “started” during Reconstruction

[I put *started* in quotations because I felt the Memphis Cotton Exchange must have had earlier beginnings, as cotton was important in the region long before 1874. I assumed 1874 was when, as part of Reconstruction, a preexisting, similar agency was required to restructure and reestablish itself as the Cotton Exchange.]

Cotton: the all-powerful entity

Wealthy subculture existing in between the barbecue and blues music

[The movie described the elite segment of the Memphis population that made vast fortunes during the Cotton Exchange's burgeoning years, and the film glamorized this subculture.]

Eli Whitney is the reason for jazz and the Harlem Renaissance.

[The film put forth that the cotton industry was responsible for the black American community's past contributions to American art. The hardships African Americans endured laboring on Southern plantations — and subsequently migrating away from such hardships — certainly influenced African American art. The responsibility for their own art is obviously in their own hands, however, and not the hands of their oppressors.]

Very positive view of the cotton business in Memphis. Oh my god. They are shoving it down the throat now.

Dominate the indomitable — interesting word choice.

[Matt and I were the museum's only present visitors until a black family came in and sat down in front of us a few minutes into the film. Most of the movie concerned the topic of slavery. Toward the movie's end, the narrator ambiguously referred to King Cotton as having proved itself capable of "dominating the indomitable." As the credits rolled, I asked the museum hostess what she felt was meant by that phrase, and I asked her especially loud and clear, making sure the family in front of us would

hear me. The hostess became flustered and responded that she was unsure and would “have to look into it.”]

William Dunavant

Dunavant Enterprises

[William Dunavant — the chairman of Dunavant Enterprises, Inc., the company that owns the Cotton Exchange — was credited as the film’s executive producer.]

The old museum lady is wearing a skirt made of hemp. I promised not to tell if she won’t tell that my shoes are hemp.

[After the movie, I told the museum hostess I may not be welcome in the Cotton Museum because the black-and-white Adidas sneakers I was wearing were made of hemp, but she assured me it was not a problem. She said the long skirt she was wearing was also made of hemp. This led into our discussing hemp’s remarkable versatility and the medical uses of marijuana. Then we started to talk about cotton, and she informed me that sharecropping is still widespread throughout the United States, including on cotton farms. I was stunned. What I had been taught for so long to be an inactive relic from a less egalitarian era in America’s history, I suddenly learned to be a present reality nearly half a century after the height of the civil rights movement. The museum’s main exhibit hall occupies a single spacious room and is designed to replicate the trading floor of the Memphis Cotton Exchange as it appeared in 1939. This includes a loft along one side of the room, on which

mannequins dressed in period clothing are posed in front of an expansive trading board that has 1939 cotton prices marked on it in chalk. Toward the back of the main exhibit hall, underneath the loft, there is a row of wooden vintage telephone booths used during the Cotton Exchange's earlier years, and the booths had been converted into video-watching booths with touchscreens. I got in one booth and Matt got in the one directly to my left. The booths are connected to one another and separated by glass windows, so Matt and I could see and hear each other. Each monitor had the same three movies to choose from, and we decided to watch the movie titled *The Plantation System in Southern Life*. Matt pressed the play button on his screen a moment before I started my video, causing the audio to overlap in our booths. This, combined with our being on acid and the small size of the booths, made for a disorienting situation.]

Film: *The Plantation System in Southern Life*

Man, weren't the cotton kings rich.

[The film was black-and-white and released in the fifties. As well as discussing the antebellum plantation system, the film addressed in a highly positive tone the sharecropping that arose after the Civil War. The following are actual excerpts from the video, all of which were narrated with an ingratiating delivery:]

- the plantation was a little community —
- there were small cabins for the slaves, who did almost all the work —
- cheap slave labor producing one main crop on vast tracts of land —

[I took the film to be racist propaganda designed to convince a past generation of schoolchildren that an economy based on the labor of oppressed blacks was not only natural but also desirable and alluring. I felt I could not record all of the video's offensive statements and glaring flaws, so I decided to write my own interpretation of the video's underlying message:]

Plantation life is so good for the rich white aristocracy and so bad for those worthless fucking blacks. What good niggers, workin' for their great white masters. You know they like to suck that big white cock. Suck my King Cotton cock, you black fucking nigs.

[Underneath this, I wrote:]

It gets a little swarthy in these booths.

[The video had propelled me into a fury. Grandiose ideas filled my mind. I thought that whatever had brought me this far would surely guide me to this bigotry's source and help me uproot such narrow-mindedness.]

"It's getting too swarthy in here," — L.L.

I hold this up to the window to my red-bearded compatriot.

[While the film was still playing, I wrote down this entry, held it up to the glass

between our booths, and motioned for Matt to read it. He read it, and we got out of the booths and left the museum. We walked toward the riverfront, and on the way, we saw a parking sign we found amusing:]

PARK IN METERED SPACES — HEAD IN ONLY

[We reached the riverbank and could see the Pyramid about a mile to our north.]

The Mississippi smells like us...worse. We are going to dredge up whatever inspiration may be within the mighty Mississippi's murky depths. Memphis has raped whatever was left of Mark Twain's corpse.

"The ghost of James Joyce is here with us," — L.L.

"We are safe because of it," — L.L.

The New Nile is at our disposal, and we are going to grab it by its skinny white neck and show it what it's had coming to it. What the fuck is the cobblestone wharf? On to the pyramids.

[Walking along the riverbank, we saw to our west a large amphitheater on the bank of a small peninsula called Mud Island. The amphitheater is built into the side of a tiered land formation in Mud Island River Park, which occupies Mud Island's narrow southern tip, and at the time, the amphitheater's shape and the tiered land around it reminded me of a truncated pyramid. Also in Mud Island River Park, to the south of the amphitheater, is a smaller tiered land formation, on top of which sits a memorial that includes some tall flagpoles. I began to believe that the amphitheater and the

memorial were resting on the tops of two incomplete pyramids mostly submerged beneath the water's surface. I became convinced that the Memphis Pyramid and these two supposed pyramids were an attempt to reproduce the three Great Pyramids of Giza. I thought the Freemasons were endeavoring to resurrect ancient Egypt, using Memphis, Tennessee, as a starting point. This is how I derived the term "the New Nile." I wrote this in the notebook:]

Amphitheater to south of Pyramid is also pyramid.

Chapter Five: The Pyramids

“The dragonflies are everywhere. It’s so beautiful,” — L.L.

[As we viewed Mud Island River Park and the Memphis Pyramid, we were walking on a cobblestone wharf on the mainland’s riverbank. The cobblestone wharf was a major boat landing during the nineteenth century. We followed it north to a grassy park. In the park, we found a commemorative plaque that provided information about the wharf, and there were homeless people sleeping on the ground and on park benches. Dragonflies were everywhere and it was beautiful. The humidity and heat had persisted all day. Both Matt and I were still sweating very much. I wanted to get a better view of the riverfront area, and we realized we could acquire such a perspective from the rooftop of one of downtown Memphis’ skyscrapers. The Morgan Keegan Tower, a block away from the park we were in, was one of the tallest buildings we could see, and it seemed as if it would have an excellent view of the riverfront area from its rooftop. We walked to the street corner next to the park and waited there to cross.]

An old-looking auto shop has written on its deteriorated side: “Pyramid Detailing — 435-3315.” A boat/van drives by filled with passengers. “Ride The Ducks” is painted on its hull. We cross the street.

[I have learned since that the Ride The Ducks “boat/van” is an amphibious vehicle that was used for tours of downtown Memphis and the Wolf River Lagoon, the strip of water between Mud Island’s eastern coast and the mainland.]

“Did you hear about the old lady that got a ticket for crossing the street too slow?”

— Gunther.

“No way. For real?” — L.L.

“Seriously. It’s true,” — Gunther.

We arrive at the Morgan Keegan building and sit under its three pyramids to build our strength.

[In front of the Morgan Keegan Tower’s main entrance, Matt and I discussed our plans. The design in the building’s side directly above the main entrance includes three large triangles with their tops flattened, each similar in shape to the Great Seal’s incomplete pyramid, and I believed this decoration was Masonic symbolism. We decided to try using our journalist cover to talk our way onto the roof.]

“No matter what happens, follow my lead. Please,” — L.L.

“That’s what I’m here for. As long as we don’t get shot or arrested, I’ll follow your lead,” — Gunther.

[The main entrance’s glass doors were locked, and we signaled the security guard inside to let us in. Although the security guard, a middle-aged black woman, seemed

startled by our presence, she nevertheless unlocked the doors and invited us into the building's lobby. She agreed with us when we told her how swarthy it was outside. We told her we were reporters and that we wanted to get access to the roof for a better view of the riverfront. She said the building was closed to visitors on weekends and told us the property manager would be back on Monday if we wanted to talk with her. We said that we were only in town for the weekend and needed the view for an article in our paper and that the article was due the next week. She told us again we should come back Monday and talk with the property manager. A white man in jeans and an untucked short-sleeved button-up shirt stepped out of an elevator and stood in the lobby with us until we left. I pleaded with the security guard to let us onto the roof. I hurriedly explained to her my theory about the Freemasons reconstructing the Great Pyramids, but she did not seem very interested in hearing me out. Before Matt and I left, I requested the security guard's name and the property manager's name and phone number.]

Officer Thornton

Pat Robinson: 557-1050

No luck at Morgan Keegan. So we go next door to the other high rise. But wait.

It's The Renaissance Apartments.

[The Renaissance Apartments building, next to the Morgan Keegan Tower, also seemed as if it would have a good view of the riverfront from its roof. Before we tried to get into The Renaissance Apartments, we went across the street to Jack's Food to buy water. Inside the store, there was a long line at the cash register. We took two

bottled waters from the back and got in line to pay. In reference to the “it” and the people in line, I said this to Matt:]

“They get it,” — L.L., in the food shop across from The Renaissance.

[While we were in line, a brief but heated exchange occurred between a customer and the cashier. The angry customer and the man accompanying him stormed out of the store.]

“They must not know Jack,” — L.L., in Jack’s Food.

[In an elevator, on the way to the top floor of The Renaissance Apartments building, I wrote:]

“Think about how quickly we’re rising. Doesn’t that freak you out?” — L.L., in the elevator somehow.

A lady accidentally let us into the apartment building. Now we’re getting access to the roof.

[When we tried to get into The Renaissance Apartments, we found that its main entrance was locked, so we pressed a button on an intercom box for assistance. We waited there awhile, and right as we were about to leave, a woman came and opened the door from inside the building. We thought she was someone working for the apartment coming to talk to us, but she was just someone leaving the apartment

building. She kept walking after she held the door open for us. We walked into the lobby and saw a few people talking in what we assumed to be the building's main office. We went straight to the elevators and took one to the top floor, and once there, I searched for surveillance cameras.]

“There are no cameras here, but if there are, they are very well hidden,” — L.L.

[The top floor's hallways were plain and undecorated. We checked the stairwells to see if the doors to the roof were unlocked or if the lock boxes containing keys to the doors to the roof were unlocked, but everything was tightly secured. We decided to go back down to the lobby and ask the management for roof access. On our way down in the elevator, I found a cigarette I had put behind my ear and forgotten about. I had sweat so much that the cigarette had become soaked and fallen apart in my hair. I picked out what was left of the cigarette and threw it all on the elevator's floor. I wrote this:]

I have sweat through the cigarette behind my ear.

[Back in the lobby, we saw that the office we had seen people in earlier was now empty, so Matt and I sat on a couch and waited. The wall next to us was gold colored and reflective, and we commented to each other how it looked as if it could be a two-way mirror, like the kind used in interrogation rooms. After a few minutes, a tall black security guard came and asked if he could help us. He did not ask us how we got into the building. We told him we were reporters and asked whether he could let

us onto the roof. He said that only a manager could give us access to the roof and that no manager would be back until six that evening. We asked whether any other nearby tall buildings had views of the riverfront from their roofs, and he told us the Sleep Inn down the street had a good view. The security guard did not seem happy to be talking with us. Matt and I made some remarks about how swarthy the weather was and then left.]

The Sleep Inn is our next stop. Only the management could have let us onto the apartment building's roof. Management's out till six.

[We walked outside and lit cigarettes, and after a moment, a young white woman wearing dirty clothes came up to us. She seemed distressed and asked us if we would give her some money. She told us she had lost her factory job because of a layoff. She said that, without a paycheck, her car had been repossessed. She told us that she had been evicted from her apartment and that she had been left with whatever she could carry. She said her family would not help her. She trembled as she spoke. We told her we didn't have any money and gave her a few cigarettes, and then she walked away and stood on a street corner a short distance from us. Matt and I were still standing in front of the apartment building when two apparently homeless white men started walking toward us from across the street. They approached us and asked for money to buy beer, and we told them we didn't have any money and gave them some cigarettes. Whereas the woman we had just talked to appeared new to being homeless, these two men seemed to be professionals. They were friendly, energetic, and talkative. One was taller than the other and more outgoing. He said his name

was Paul, and he introduced his friend as Smiley. Paul had short brown hair, his skin was aged, tan, and tattooed, and his eyes were sharp and engaging. Smiley had short faded blond hair and an unkempt beard. His skin was pink from the sun. He was soft-spoken, and true to his name, he was always smiling. We told them we were trying to get a view of the riverfront from a skyscraper's roof and asked them where we could find the Sleep Inn. They said that the Sleep Inn was only a block away but that it was too short for a good view. They told us other buildings would be better for what we needed. Then they asked us why we wanted to see the riverfront from a skyscraper's roof. We told them we had learned some disturbing information about Memphis and were writing something about all of it. They said there are definitely weird things going on in the city. Paul told us he had been in prison for a while for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he said he hadn't managed to hold a job since he had been out. He told us that he wasn't complaining, that he had accepted his life the way it was. He said he still thought we should hear about it. Paul said all he had done was be a victim of circumstance and a dumb mistake from his youth. They told us they stay at the mission sometimes — only sometimes, because other times they feel it's better to fend for themselves under a bridge. They went on about the people who turn up their noses at them when they ask for a few bucks or need to use the bathroom — they told us stores downtown restrict them from using their restrooms unless they buy something — and how self-serving everyone seems to be. They told us how there are numerous expensive building renovation projects going on in downtown Memphis and how the mission is an overcrowded, understaffed dump that serves bad food. And Paul said: "There's that part in the Bible when it says, 'How many times should I forgive my brother?' And Jesus said,

‘Not seven times, but seventy times seven.’” Paul began to speak more, but I beckoned him to hush. Across the street from where we were standing, there was a sign above the entrance of a building next to Jack’s Food, and on the sign, in big colorful lettering, was printed “Paradise 7’s” next to a picture of a slot machine’s face that showed straight sevens — “7-7-7.” I pointed out the sign to Paul, Smiley, and Matt. They all said it was quite a coincidence, but I felt it was something much deeper. I suggested we continue our conversation as we walk, and they all agreed. Paul and Smiley told Matt and I we should try to get onto the Peabody’s roof. Matt and I knew of the Peabody, a famous hotel in Memphis, but did not know where it was located. Paul and Smiley said it was not far away, to the south. They said they would take us to it. I walked with Paul while Matt and Smiley walked behind us, and they told us more about being homeless, about the daily rigors they experience. Paul told me about a woman with whom he had been through some awful times and whom he still loved very much. He said he was going to take her with him to California to live on a ranch one of his relatives owns as soon as he received a check coming to him in a month from the government or an old employer or something. I asked Paul how old he was, and I think he said he was forty-eight. I told him my parents were around that age. His eyes lit up and he told me about his three kids. Smiley told us he’s called Smiley because he never stops smiling. He said no matter what happens in someone’s life or what anybody goes through, there’s nothing that should ever make anyone stop smiling. We checked out the tall buildings we passed as we walked, but all of them appeared inaccessible or seemed to have other buildings obstructing their views of the riverfront. We had been with Paul and Smiley for about half an hour when we came within view of a tall white building Paul

and Smiley said was the Peabody. When we were about a block from the building, Paul said something that I took to be profound. I wrote down a paraphrase of what he said:]

“Why do you need the high-rise view? Go and sleep on the river. That’s how the hell you find the goddam river,” — Paul.

[I thanked Paul enthusiastically and told him he had given me exactly what I was looking for. I told him and Smiley we did not need their escort any longer. We thanked them for their association, and they asked us to come back and visit them some time. The four of us shared a group hug. I asked them for their full names.]

Paul Moore and Steven Burks

[Moore is my mother’s maiden name and my middle name. I told Paul this, and we joked that we are probably related. They walked away, back in the direction we had come from, and after they turned a corner, I vigorously embraced Matt. I was on the verge of tears. I asked whether he had any idea what had just happened to us. He said he was pretty sure he did. I told him that we had just been given a gift, that we had just witnessed the hand of God. I told him this was all going to make one hell of a story. He said he sure hoped so. We continued walking to the white building that was supposedly the Peabody, and when we got there, we found that it was actually a condominium building, the Waterford Plaza. Regardless, it looked as though it might have a decent view from its rooftop, so we went inside and talked with the thin black

man working the front desk. We mentioned that it was very swarthy outside, and he echoed this sentiment. We said we were reporters and that we wanted to get roof access. He told us we would have to talk with a manager. He said the managers were out for the day. I asked him if he had a key to the roof, and he said he did. I contemplated trying to bribe him, but I decided against it. He still would not let us onto the roof after I explained to him my theory about the Freemasons and “the New Nile.” We left and started walking back to the parking garage. It was around four o'clock, and we wanted to be at the Widespread Panic show that night by six. My mom called my cell phone while we were on our way back to the parking garage. She knew I had gone to Memphis for the weekend, and she was calling to check up on me. I told her Matt and I were exploring downtown Memphis, and she asked if we had gone to the National Civil Rights Museum, which is located at the site of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. I said we hadn't and we talked a bit more. By the time we ended the conversation, I could tell she was worried about me. It was a short walk back to the Cotton Museum, which is on the corner of Union Avenue and Front Street. The parking garage we had parked in is also on Union Avenue, a few blocks from the Cotton Museum. It was when we turned the corner at the Cotton Museum onto Union Avenue that I started to believe we were being watched. There were two middle-aged white people — a man and a woman, both in ordinary clothing — standing next to each other on the corner, and as we approached the corner, their backs were to us. The man looked behind him and saw us, and then he turned back around, put his hand on the woman's shoulder, pointed down the street, and seemed to begin giving her directions, as if she was lost and had asked him how to get somewhere. I began to think what Matt and I had been doing while downtown,

although relatively benign, could have attracted some attention from local law enforcement. I wondered whether these people had been assigned to keep an eye on us. I did not want to believe this, as it seemed unlikely, and I said nothing about it to Matt. After walking about a hundred feet down the sidewalk from the corner, I intentionally dropped the liter Dasani bottle I had gotten at Jack's Food earlier, and I acted as if I had accidentally dropped the bottle. I casually bent over and picked up the bottle, and while rising, I quickly turned around. The two people on the corner were staring at us and still standing together. The man no longer appeared to be giving the woman directions. Once I turned back around, I saw a white man about our age come out of a building's entrance a short distance in front of us and start walking on the sidewalk, in the same direction we were walking. He was tall and muscular and wearing a white polo shirt and khaki shorts. He kept a slow pace, and after a moment, we were only a few feet behind him. I slowed down, and Matt did, as well. I noticed that the bulge in this man's back pants pocket that he had his wallet in seemed much bulkier than the mass implied by his wallet's outline, and I began to think he might be concealing a weapon in there. Then he thumbed the flap of fabric covering the same pocket's opening. I did not want to let on that I felt something was wrong. I stopped walking and stalled Matt by telling him we should go to the actual Peabody Hotel, which we had found out was also on Union Avenue, a block down from the parking garage. Matt stopped, too, and I prolonged our discussion until the man in front of us was far ahead. Matt and I resumed walking. I kept my eye on the man in front of us, and when he got to the next intersection, he stopped, turned around, looked straight at us, and then turned the corner. I started to give my paranoia some credit. I fought it, however, as I understood that such thoughts could

become greatly exaggerated by the drugs we were on. When we got to the street corner, I looked in the direction I had seen the young man walk, but I did not see him. We did see a tall gray and blue building on that street, in the same direction, and we decided to get a closer look. While walking there, we noticed this spelled out in large letters above another building's entrance:]

DOWNTOWN WIGS

[I assumed this is the name of a wig store, Downtown Wigs, although a *W* is ostensibly absent. I noticed that, if the *W* in *WIGS* were removed and the spacing altered, this could read: "DOWN TO NIGS." This is in a busy area of downtown Memphis, and I considered this to be audacious Masonic racism. We got to the gray and blue building and found that it was under construction and evidently unoccupied. It seemed like it would have a good view of the riverfront from its roof. Since it was under construction, we wondered whether its entrance might be unlocked, and as if on cue, when we neared the building, a man dragging a cooler behind him opened the building's front door and walked inside. We stood in front of the building and debated whether or not to go inside. I felt like it would be an inescapable ambush if we went in, although I did not say this to Matt. I told him we didn't have enough time and should just go to the Peabody. We walked back to Union Avenue and continued walking toward the Peabody. We passed our parking garage, which was on the other side of Union, and we came to the next cross street and waited at the corner to walk across. Standing next to us on the street corner was a middle-aged white man, and he appeared to be about to cross in the other

direction. I thought this man seemed nervous. He was carrying a shopping bag that was sagging at the bottom. I glanced inside it when he was looking away, and I saw plain white paper at the top of the bag, covering the bag's contents. I believed this man was some agent, too. I thought he had a recording device or a weapon in his bag, underneath the paper. When we started to walk across the street, toward the Peabody, the man with the bag hesitated and then followed us. Halfway across the street, I whispered to Matt to follow me, and then I switched directions, ran across Union, and headed for the parking garage. I looked behind us, and the man with the bag had turned around and was watching us. We went into the parking garage through the vehicle entrance and walked up the incline that spirals up the garage. As we were about to make our first turn up the incline, I looked behind us, and two young white men wearing white polo shirts and khaki shorts were walking into the garage through the vehicle entrance and staring at us. I began to walk faster and told Matt to hurry up. When we got to the third story of the garage, the two guys in white polo shirts were still not far behind us. As we turned the next corner, out of their view, I started to run, and I motioned for Matt to keep up. I ran the rest of the way to the Explorer. I still had Matt's keys, and I unlocked the Explorer, got in, and started it. Once Matt got in, I reversed out of the parking space and finally told him I thought we were being followed. I turned the first corner going down, expecting to see the two men that had been behind us, but I didn't see them. I asked Matt whether he had seen them. He said he hadn't noticed anybody. Then three cars in front of us simultaneously started backing out of their spaces, and another car came down the incline from behind us. All four of these cars seemed to be very new, and two of them were black Mercedes sedans. I honked my horn and weaved through the cars that

were backing out. I asked Matt if he saw what I was talking about. He told me that I needed to calm down, that I shouldn't start freaking out. We waited behind a minivan at the ticket booth, and the other cars drove up behind us. We exited the parking garage, and instead of turning left, which would have taken us straight back to the interstate, we turned right, toward the riverfront, because there was a lot of traffic to our left. We got to the riverfront and had to turn left because the street was blocked on the right by construction. The two black Mercedeses were directly behind us. I turned onto Beale Street, and they did, too. I turned onto another street, and the Mercedeses stayed on Beale. Then a large pickup truck with tinted windows drove up right behind us. The truck accelerated, drove around the Explorer, getting in front of us, and then made a sharp turn at the next street. The truck had a temporary plate taped to its rear window and no regular license plate. After the truck had turned, a new BMW coupe with tinted windows drove up fast behind us as we came to a red light, and then it slowly crept around to the Explorer's driver's side. The light changed, and the BMW sped ahead of us, changed back into our lane, and then turned onto another street. Matt began to show signs of worry, and he asked why all of these cars were doing such unusual things around us. I told him about the two people on the street corner at the Cotton Exchange, the guy in the white polo shirt and khaki shorts who thumbed his back pocket, the guy with the shopping bag at the crosswalk, and the two guys that followed us up the parking garage. I told him it had to be the Freemasons. He seemed to believe me. I was now driving on side streets, hoping to find somewhere I was familiar with. At some point during the drive, Matt and I saw a billboard advertisement for the Memphis Zoo's panda exhibit, and I asked Matt to write down in the notebook what was on the billboard.]

Black and white and blues (with a picture of a panda)

[I eventually came to a road I recognized, one I knew would take us back to the Knights Inn. I got into the right-hand turning lane at the intersection, and in front of us, there was a black Mercedes hatchback waiting to turn the same way. It had tinted windows and a temporary license plate, and although the traffic signal was green as we approached the car, it delayed making the turn until we were right behind it. The car turned and we did, too. The Mercedes changed into the left lane, slowed down, allowing us to pass, and then got back into the right lane, directly behind us. I maintained my speed, and the Mercedes sped up, got in front of us again, and then immediately turned onto another road. Matt and I were both becoming frightened. Matt said what these vehicles had been doing around us must have been orchestrated. I said that we had come too close, that we had been right about the Freemasons reviving ancient Egypt. I said that, because we were attempting to expose Memphis for the hub of racist Masonic activities it is, we were receiving a warning from these people that they should not be interfered with. We decided then we would skip the Widespread Panic show that night and leave for Nashville as soon as we got back to the hotel and picked up Mikael. As we discussed this, a minivan passed us on our right-hand side, and the minivan had tinted windows and a temporary license plate. Once it passed us, its rear liftgate swung open. I almost screamed. I expected men with ski masks on in the back of the minivan to open fire on us with automatic weapons, but instead of gun-wielding thugs, there was only a chubby young black boy who was trying to reclose the liftgate by pulling on a rope

attached to its inside handle. He kept pulling, but it did not close. The minivan turned onto another road. I thought this incident with the minivan had been the Freemasons showing us their capabilities, letting us know that we weren't safe, that any minivan's liftgate could open without warning, that goons with machineguns might really be in there next time. I told Matt they could have bugged the Explorer while we were walking around downtown. He said he had just been thinking the same thing. We did not talk for the rest of the ride back to the hotel. We got back to the hotel about ten minutes later, and when I took the key out of the ignition, an odd noise, like feedback, came out of the speaker in the driver's-side door. I asked Matt if that happened often. He said he didn't remember it ever happening before. I grabbed the notebook and locked the Explorer, and we walked to our room. Mikael answered the door. He told us right away that, a few minutes prior, he had been woken up from a nap by two attractive girls who had knocked on the door and were looking for a ride to the concert. I thought the Freemasons had sent these girls. We told Mikael that we weren't staying for the show and that we were driving back to Nashville. We told him that some crazy stuff had happened. We said we couldn't tell him about it right then. I was worried our room was bugged, too. We told him we needed to leave as soon as possible, and he responded without resistance. We gathered all of our belongings and quickly packed them. I became convinced that someone had snuck into our room while Matt and I were gone, perhaps while Mikael had been asleep. I looked under the beds for intruders lying in wait, but I found none. The substantial remainder of cocaine was still on the table next to the window, and I asked whether either of them wanted to save any of it. They said they didn't. I suggested I finish off what was left, saying it would help me stay awake during the drive. Mikael said he

didn't care if I finished it, and Matt said he didn't want any more. When I sat down to do the blow, I noticed it looked clumpier than I remembered it being. I had thoughts of the same people who I imagined had broken in switching or mixing the cocaine with a more dangerous mind-altering substance. I asked Matt to taste it, and he did and said it tasted like coke. I snorted all that was left. It was by far the most I had ever taken in one sitting. I was completely confident in my ability to drive while this intoxicated. Not only had I been driving all day, and driving well, as Matt attests, but I also had a flawless and lengthy history of driving under all sorts of influences. Right as we were about to leave the hotel, I sat on one of the beds and wrote what would be my last entry in the notebook. I did not tell Matt and Mikael what I had written.]

Leaving Memphis. Prenotes to an addendum. I hope to God we make it to Nashville safely. It is out of my hands, however. We will see soon.

The Drive Home

The following is my recollection of what occurred after leaving the hotel to drive back to Nashville:

I unlock the Explorer and put my bookbag in the back, next to Matt's huge subwoofer. I toss the notebook in the back seat. There's a lot of junk in the back seat, on the driver's side. I tell Mikael he may want to sit on the other side, but he insists on sitting on the driver's side. He moves all of the stuff to the other side and gets in with his duffel bag and a six-pack of Shiner Bock. Matt throws his bookbag in the back and gets in the front passenger seat. I get in the driver's seat and try to start the car, but nothing happens. I try again. Nothing happens again. I look at Matt, my eyes wide. There's a knock at the front driver's-side window. I snap my head around. It's a blond hippie girl, and standing next to her is a pale teenage guy with long straight black hair. The girl waves and smiles. I open the door.

"Hey, are y'all goin' to the Widespread show tonight?" she asks. "We need a ride." I know she's a part of all this. My eyes are drawn to the green stone on her necklace. It has to be some sort of symbol.

"I'm really sorry," I say. "We were gonna go, but we've got to head back to Nashville. Sort of an emergency situation came up."

"Ah, come on," she says. "You've gotta go. You're gonna miss out, and we really

need a ride.” The guy with her seems nervous. I don’t trust them at all.

“Hell of a guilt trip to pull on a guy who’s tripping his balls off,” I reply. I can’t believe they’re being so persistent, sending this many people after us. I want them to know that I’m tripping, that this was all an accident, that we were just trying to have some fun. They probably think we’re trying to take them down, after we were walking around downtown and checking out skyscrapers and writing in the notebook. “Listen. Like I said, we’ve gotta get back,” I tell her. “Y’all have fun tonight.”

“Whatever. Good luck with your *emergency*,” she says sarcastically and gives me an all-too-knowing look.

I close the door, and I turn the key again. The engine starts.

“Why did the car start now?” I ask frantically, backing out of the parking space. “Why didn’t it start earlier? Why did she just say that to me like that? Why did they come up to the car right then anyway?”

“Dude, chill out,” Matt says. “Please.”

“What is going on, guys?” Mikael asks.

I don’t say anything.

“We’ll tell you in a bit,” Matt says. “We should let Jesse focus on driving for now.”

We leave the Knights Inn parking lot and come to a red light and stop. I look in the rearview mirror and see the top half of my face in the reflection. Damn, my eyes are bloodshot. If we get pulled over, we’re screwed. I drag hard on my cigarette.

The Explorer’s windows are down. My bandana is damp with sweat, but I’m still wearing it, because it’s keeping my hair from blowing in my face. I get on the interstate. Why does it seem like there was only one way for me to go today? Why does the craziest shit always happen to me when I’m on acid?

I look around at the cars next to us. Nothing seems too suspicious. I don't think any cars are following us. I'm still driving fine.

What's this? A portable road sign on the side of the interstate reads: "LANE CLOSURES UNTIL 10 P.M. FOR NIGHT PAVING."

"Why the hell is there night paving?" I wonder aloud.

Traffic slows to a crawl. We come to a stop.

"Dude, do you think this has anything to do with it?" Matt asks me.

What if the car is bugged? I'm sure they're listening in on us to learn how much we've figured out.

"I don't know, man," I tell him. "I don't know. Maybe I'm just tripping. Maybe I took too many drugs and imagined all of this." I light another cigarette. "Give me a little to think, okay? I need to clear my head."

Traffic still isn't moving. A huge guy wearing a black baseball cap is driving the SUV next to us on our left. He sees me looking and turns his head and raises a cell phone to his ear. There's a pickup truck on our right. The driver in the pickup does the same thing — he looks away and lifts a cell phone to his ear.

They're onto us.

The minivan in front of us has a catholic school sticker on its rear window. The Freemasons took control of the Vatican in the fifties.

It's cool. Stay calm.

How could they have cars all around us? This doesn't make sense. What if Freemasons are driving *all* of these cars? That's impossible. There's no way. The logistics are unimaginable. Think of all the phone calls, the ability to mobilize. Maybe there are only a few, scattered close by. The night paving is a cover. They're stalling us.

We really must have pissed them off.

“I’m not sure exactly,” I say, “but I think we’ll be safe when we get back to Nashville.” Matt turns to me and shrugs his shoulders. After a while, the traffic starts moving again.

A box van is parked on the side of the interstate, up ahead on the left. Its back doors are open and there’s a bunch of equipment loaded in the back. It looks like there’s room for someone to lie down, concealed under all of that stuff. I see a glint of light underneath that equipment. Is that light reflecting off of a camera lens? Are they photographing us or filming us? Someone is changing one of the van’s tires. Did he just look at us? I pass the van and keep an eye on it in my side-view mirror. Did the guy changing the tire just say something to somebody under the van? Is there someone under the van aiming something at us?

I hear something hit the Explorer’s underside. A flapping noise starts coming from our right-hand side.

“What was that?” I ask. “What’s that noise? Is that a tire?”

“I don’t know,” Matt says.

“That flapping noise,” I say. “What the fuck is that?”

“I hear it, too,” Matt says. “I don’t know what it is.”

“Did y’all see that van back there?” I ask.

They both say that they didn’t notice the van. There’s an exit up ahead: Getwell Road.

“I’m getting off here,” I say. “I’ve got to check out this noise.”

The flapping noise is getting worse. I’m worried a tire is about to blow out. I take the Getwell Road exit, and right as I get on the exit ramp, the noise stops. I drive down

Getwell Road a short distance, blatantly U-turn into oncoming traffic, honking my horn, and take the on-ramp back onto the interstate. I accelerate into the flow of traffic and the noise does not come back.

“Why did it just stop when I got off at that exit?” I yell.

“I’m not sure,” Matt calmly replies.

Why don’t they seem more freaked out by this? Do they think I’m losing my mind? I look at Mikael in the rearview mirror. He’s uninterestedly looking out his window. And if they do think I’m going crazy, then why are they still letting me drive? I wonder whether that U-turn back there would have lost anybody tailing us. I check the sky for helicopters. We’re clear. I should’ve stayed in Murfreesboro for the weekend. But then I wouldn’t have gotten all of this information. I have to make it back home and get this story out. People need to know how deep all of this really goes.

I get onto I-40 — a straight shot to Nashville. A van passes us on our right-hand side. Is that the same van from the side of the interstate earlier? A sports car speeds by us on our left. A big pickup truck passes us on our right. The pickup pulls in front of us and slows down to our speed. The truck has a temporary plate and tinted windows. They’ve caught back up with us. I have to keep a level head. Don’t panic.

I shift into the next lane to the left, and the truck shifts with me. I shift left again into the lane next to the concrete median. The truck shifts with me.

The truck’s driver’s-side rear quarter-window is popped open at an angle. What is that poking out of the quarter window? Is that a hand? Is that a camera? Is that a gun barrel? It can’t be. It has to be the quarter window’s hinge. No, there’s the hinge. Whatever it is, it’s definitely above the hinge, and now it’s moving. I think it is a gun! I’m not going to act like I notice. I’m not going to look at it.

Calm down. It probably isn't a gun, Jesse. I need to seriously chill out. Just try not to look at it and don't think about it. Damn, that does look a lot like a gun barrel.

POW!

I just heard a loud explosion, and I saw a muzzle flash come from the truck's quarter window. And out of the corner of my eye, I saw some movement in my side-view mirror. Despite this commotion, I've maintained good control of the Explorer.

"What the fuck!" I yell. "What the hell was that?"

"Dude, it's alright," Matt says. "It was Mikael. Take it easy. Mikael just dropped a beer bottle out the window."

I see Mikael laughing in the rearview mirror. He smiles at me. There is something sinister in that smile, something I hadn't noticed about him until now. My mind pieces together what happened — Mikael holding the beer bottle out the window, the muzzle flash, that terrible blast. That *was* a gun. Mikael held a Shiner Bock out the window, and then that guy shot it while Mikael was holding it. What marksmanship. Mikael's still smiling at me like that. Matt is laughing now. Why the hell does he think this is funny?

Oh my god. Why would Mikael hold out a beer bottle for someone to shoot? Why would Matt lie and say Mikael dropped it?

Matt and Mikael are in on this, too.

Why didn't they shoot *me*? They're testing me. This is too much. How could Matt and Mikael be in on it? This changes everything. This whole day must have been staged. Every step of this trip must have been planned out. Matt and Mikael are whispering with each other. I've got to get out of here, out of this car. I should pull over and get out in the open so I can have witnesses. They can't act if they're exposed.

Mikael has a knife on him. He's kept it in his pocket the entire trip. I borrowed it

from him this morning to cut up some blow. It's razor sharp. When I borrowed it, I didn't trust myself holding it, because I was tripping so hard, and I didn't even end up using it. At the hotel, when we got in the Explorer to leave for Nashville, he must have moved all of that stuff out of the way to sit behind me so he could guard me.

I see what would happen if I were to make a move:

Mikael would swiftly plunge his knife into the side of my neck and saw it out the front, my head falling back and to the side, blood spurting everywhere. Matt would grab the wheel and straddle his leg over to the brake pedal and stop the car on the side of the interstate. Then he and Mikael would hop out and get into the back of some black Suburban and smoke expensive cigars in celebration of a successful job. My body would be convulsing, slumped over the Explorer's bloody steering wheel, the Suburban speeding away from the scene.

How could they do this? How could they lead me on like this? I hadn't seen Matt in so long. I guess we did part on bad terms in high school, but I thought we had moved past that. And where exactly has he been getting all of this money? And what about the Ecstasy and cocaine connections, the hotel rooms, the bottles of champagne, and that guy with the Porsche? I knew none of it made any sense. But I had no reason to suspect anything like this.

And then there's Mikael. I really know nothing about him. He seemed nice enough, but I never quite knew what to make of him. And now, with him having a sharp knife and sitting right behind me, everything I remember about him seems suspect. I want to ask them something, to say something, to know for sure this is happening. But I don't want to let on that I know. But how could they think I didn't catch on after the beer bottle was shot? I guess I acted as if I thought Mikael had been joking around. What a

joke that was. There's no way. I get the feeling I'm not supposed to ask questions. They're clearly in control. I've just got to go along for the ride at this point.

My seatbelt tightens hard around my waist.

Mikael must be stepping on my seatbelt back there. I look in the rearview mirror. He's staring out his window.

"Hey, Mikael," I say. "I think you're stepping on my seatbelt."

"My bad," he says. The seatbelt loosens.

Did he really not know he was stepping on it? The Explorer's fuel gauge is far past empty.

"We're almost out of gas, guys," I tell them, my voice wavering. "I'm gonna stop at the next exit." I feel like a hostage. I guess I am one.

"Sure, man," says Matt. "Next exit. Whenever."

Why is this happening to me? What the fuck are they doing? What did I do? What will happen next? What could they want from me? Maybe they just want my silence. Maybe they want to rub my nose in the fact that I'm powerless to stop them.

There's an exit coming up. The interstate has seemed like a straight line for so long now. I don't even know how long I've been driving. Everything is blurring together.

I'm shaking. My hands are fucking shaking. I don't know these people. I've never known them. It's all been lies. But why would they do this? What are they up to? My seatbelt tightens again.

Why is he stepping on my goddam seatbelt? Is this part of the test? I haven't given them any major signs that I know what's going on — as if I have any idea what's going on.

"I think you've got my seatbelt again, Mikael," I tell him.

“Oh really?” he asks. “Sorry, man. Didn’t realize.” I can’t tell if he’s being sincere.

The seatbelt loosens. I catch his eyes and his unsettling smile in the rearview mirror.

I realize I just missed the exit for gas, and I tell this to Matt and Mikael. “I hope we’ve got enough gas to make it to the next one,” I say.

“I’m sure we’ll be fine,” Matt says.

I need to relax. I need to pay attention to the road.

A little while later, we come to another exit.

“Don’t miss this one,” Matt reminds me.

“I’ve got it,” I say.

Matt and Mikael whisper and then laugh excitedly. Matt makes some hand gestures, like sign language, to Mikael. Mikael signs back to Matt. Why are they signing? They must be using Freemason hand signals. I won’t look over at them. I won’t let them know I’m onto them.

I get off at the exit and turn in to the gas station. It’s the only thing around at this exit. There’s one road and one traffic light and this gas station and nothing else. We are in the middle of nowhere. An old black man standing next to a parked car stares at us as I pull up next to a pump. I feel other eyes watching us. I put the car in park and turn it off, and I look straight ahead, my hands on the steering wheel. Mikael gets out and goes around to Matt’s window. They’re talking to each other, but I can’t hear what they’re saying. Matt hands Mikael some cash.

“You want anything, Jess?” Mikael asks.

“Sure. A pack of Winston Lights, please,” I say briskly, not making eye contact with him. He walks into the gas station’s store.

I still feel eyes on us from all around the parking lot. Running would be pointless. I don't even know where we are. I feel the Explorer moving. We are rolling backward. But the gearshift is in park. We stop rolling after a moment. How could we roll back like that? This is impossible — unless this gas station is fake and we're actually parked on a conveyor belt or a moveable platform. The Explorer definitely rolled back about fifteen feet, and the gearshift is still in park. What the hell is going on?

I realize Matt isn't going to say anything. I want him to know that I won't talk to anybody about what I know, that I can be silent. The people around us at the gas station are all in on it, too. They'll murder me if I give them any reason. If Matt thinks I'll talk about this, or if I try to make a break for it, they'll kill me and leave me in a random field for wild dogs or whatever else. I want him to know that I'll comply, that I'll be totally cool about all of this.

“Is it okay if we don't talk about any of this until we get back home?” I ask.

“I think that's a good idea,” he says.

We sit in silence for what seems like a long time. Mikael finally comes back, and he tosses my cigarettes to me through the open front passenger-side window.

“Is everything alright?” Mikael asks Matt.

“Yeah. Everything's fine.”

“Why don't ya pull up to the pump there, genius?” Mikael asks me.

“Oops. Look at that,” I say as if I hadn't noticed.

I turn on the car, drive forward, and turn it off again, and Mikael starts pumping the gas. My pack of Winston Lights is freezing cold. Why is this pack of cigarettes so cold? I have never before I've gotten a new pack of cigarettes that's freezing like this. I have to stop questioning everything. I'm going to drive myself insane. Maybe that's what

they want.

Mikael finishes pumping the gas, gets back in the car, and sits in the same seat, directly behind me.

“Okay. Let’s blow,” Mikael says and pats my headrest.

We leave the gas station and get back on the interstate. Matt puts in a CD: a mix of songs we used to listen to together in high school.

“We should get some food in a minute,” Matt says. “Keep your eyes peeled for food signs.” This sounds like a command.

“Sure, man,” I say. “No problem.” It’s useless. They know I know. It’s obvious. They’ve probably known all along.

For the past couple of years now, I’ve been spouting off randomly to people about my personal politics and conspiracy theories — but that’s all over now. If I get through this alive somehow and make it back to safety, no negative word about the Freemasons or the Illuminati or whatever else will ever leave my lips again. I wasn’t even so concerned with the Freemasons, I guess. It’s just our poor fucking world. This cannot be the natural state of things. Humanity has been engineered, it engineers itself, to ignore the important side of life — the side of peace, compassion, and love. Shit, we’re even ignoring our own survival. We are killing ourselves and we are infatuated with the process. I just needed a focus, an outlet. If America is a hyperpower, the most dominant nation on the planet, then those in control of this country must hold the most responsibility for humanity’s condition. And the Freemasons *do* run the country. Resistance may be pointless. They may have the upper hand indefinitely. Maybe, but I don’t believe it. The powers that be derive their influence from a willing populace. What if the populace became unwilling? What would that take?

“Taco Bell — next exit,” Matt says. “How about it, y’all?”

“Yeah, man,” Mikael replies.

“I’m cool with that,” I say.

I get off at the next exit and drive in to the Taco Bell. There’s one car in front of us in the drive-thru. It has to be them in the car. This whole place must be crawling with menacing agents armed to the teeth. This Taco Bell, this parking lot — I know it’s all an elaborate fabrication. Everyone here is in on it. Inside the Taco Bell, there is a surveillance team monitoring us with hidden cameras and microphones, waiting to give concealed hit men the signal to move in. The Explorer has to be bugged, and Matt and Mikael must have bugs on them, too. This is all some sort of test. But why are they testing me? The car in front of us moves ahead. I drive up to the ordering intercom. The order taker greets us through the intercom, and I tell him we’ll need a minute.

“I want a Spicy Chicken Crunchwrap Supreme,” Matt tells me.

“Yes. So do I,” Mikael says.

“Do you want the combo?” Matt asks Mikael.

“Yes.”

“Okay. Get two Spicy Chicken Crunchwrap Supreme combos,” Matt tells me. “I’m taking a Sprite. Mikael, what do you want to drink?”

“Sprite me, dude.”

“Two Spicy Chicken Crunchwrap Supreme combos with Sprites,” Matt tells me.

“Say it.”

I clear my throat. “Um...hi,” I say into the intercom. “Yes, I’d like two Spicy Chicken Crunchwrap Supreme combos with Sprites, please.”

“Alright,” says the voice from the intercom. “It’s Sierra Mist, though. Not Sprite.”

"That's cool," I say.

"Do you want anything?" Matt asks me.

"I'm not hungry," I say. "Thank you, though."

"Anything to drink?" he asks.

"I'll take a water, I guess," I say.

"Well, tell him."

"I'll have one water with that, too," I say into the intercom. I flick my cigarette out the window and light another.

"Okay," I hear from the intercom. "I've got two Spicy Chicken Crunchwrap Supreme combos, two Sierra Mists, and one water. Is that it?"

"Yes," I say. "That's correct."

"Wait, man," says Mikael. "I don't want the combo. Just the Crunchwrap, a MexiMelt, and the drink."

"Hey, one sec," I say into the intercom. "The order's changed a little. Now I just want one Spicy Chicken Crunchwrap Supreme *combo*, a single Spicy Chicken Crunchwrap Supreme, and a single MexiMelt."

"Good call on the MexiMelt, yo," Matt says. "It's been forever since I've had a MexiMelt."

"So, I've got one Spicy Chicken Crunchwrap Supreme combo, one Spicy Chicken Crunchwrap Supreme, and one MexiMelt," I hear from the intercom. "You still want the two Sierra Mists and a water?"

"Yes, please," I say.

The order taker tells me the total, and I drive around to the pick-up window. Some test this is. Are they testing my ability to place confusing drive-thru orders while

on a lot of drugs? I think I'm being messed around with. There's something else going on.

Matt gives me the money, which I hand to the guy at the window. The food comes out almost instantly and I pass it to Matt. The two Sierra Mists come out next. Then the guy at the window gives me the change, which is some coins and four crisp one-dollar bills that are fanned out and all facing the same way, with the Great Seal's pyramid and all-seeing eye visible on each bill. I look at the guy in the window, a displeased-looking young black man. Farther back in the building, I see another black man, another apparent Taco Bell employee, staring at me. I take the change and give it to Matt.

"They forgot your water," Matt tells me.

"Excuse me," I say into the still-open drive-thru window. "Excuse me." The guy at the window is within earshot, but he does not respond. "Excuse me!" I yell, and he turns toward me. "Sorry, but, um, there was a water with this, too, please."

"One second," he says politely.

"Son of a bitch!" Matt cries out. "They got the order right. Somehow, they got our fucking order right."

It seems like five minutes before the guy comes back with my water. I thank him and put the lidless plastic cup of water in the center console cup holder.

We drive out of the parking lot, and Matt hands the cup of water back to me. "Put this in your crotch," he says. I take this as another command. I put the cup of water between my legs, and he puts his drink in the cup holder. The sun is now starting to set.

I get back on the interstate. This is all wearing on me severely — the drugs, the lack of sleep, the tests, Matt and Mikael constantly whispering to each other. I have to keep going. If I keep driving and do what I'm told, then maybe they'll let me live.

I wonder how long it's been since we left Memphis. It would be nice if, once this is all over with, they let me hop on a jet and go to Spain and let me just chill out in Spain for a while — drink absinthe, smoke some hash, fuck some Spanish chicks, eat a few enchiladas or whatever — really take in all Spain has to offer.

This is a dream. This is all just a crazy dream.

But I know it isn't.

The sun is almost completely set when Mikael steps on my seatbelt again. I don't say anything about it this time. The seatbelt stays tight around my waist for a few minutes. Finally, Mikael releases it.

"There's a gas station at the next exit, Jess," Mikael tells me. "I've gotta piss."

I get off at the next exit and pull into a truck stop. I drive up next to a gas pump, and I'm smoking. I could give a shit if this cigarette causes something to blow up right now.

"You guys want anything?" Mikael asks.

"Nah," Matt says. "I'm cool."

"What about you, Jess?"

"Nope."

He gets out of the car and walks inside the gas station's store. Matt and I sit in silence. The night is settling in.

"You're doing well so far," Matt says.

The totality of this whole situation washes over me in a torrent. If there was any thought left that all of this is just some outrageous, drugged-up hallucination, any thought at all, Matt's comment just killed it. I am fucked. And I have a feeling this is all about to get even more fucked up.

Helplessness overwhelms me and I begin to cry. Tears roll down my cheeks. I let my head fall back on the headrest, and I finish the rest of my cigarette in a single drag. Matt isn't reacting to my crying. I'm not sobbing, but the tears keep coming. He has to be able to see my tears and the desperation in my face. If this is all my mind playing tricks on me, then why the hell doesn't Matt ask me why I'm crying? All of this is really fucking happening.

Mikael comes out of the store and walks to the Explorer. I wipe the tears from my face. As Mikael walks by my window, he ominously smirks at me. He gets in behind me.

"We ready?" he asks.

"Yep," Matt says.

"Let's go then."

* * *

Of course, Matt was not wearing his contact lenses and had not been for the entire trip. But I was not thinking about this at the time. It had slipped my mind.

As I drove forward, away from the pump, a tractor-trailer drove in front of me, and as I followed this tractor-trailer out of the truck stop, water drained out from the back of the truck's trailer, leaving a trail of water in its path. I thought I was supposed to follow this truck. The truck got on I-40 toward Nashville and I followed directly behind.

The only identifying feature on the back of the trailer was a small sign in its bottom-left corner that read: "Super Seal." I believed "Super Seal" had special significance.

A few minutes passed, and Mikael announced we were going to smoke some weed. He told me to roll up my window, and I finished my cigarette, threw it out, and

rolled up my window. I did not think smoking the weed was negotiable. Mikael passed his glass pipe to Matt, and Matt passed it to me. As I lifted my knee to the steering wheel to free both hands to light the bowl, I accidentally tipped the cup of water I had forgotten was between my legs. Half of the water spilled out, soaking the crotch of my pants. I carefully resituated the cup between my legs and managed to steer with my knee while smoking without spilling again.

The bowl went around a few more times, and my mental condition ebbed acutely as my distress, paranoia, and fatigue combined with this round of smoking and the new night's darkness, as well as the drugs still in my system. I thought I had been ordered to smoke the weed because they knew it would increase my inebriation past a point necessary to exceed for this part of the test. Although I wanted to, I did not smoke any more cigarettes. I thought it was an ultimatum when Mikael asked me to roll up the window, and I was not going to smoke another cigarette until one of them told me I could roll down the window and do so. It was two days before I smoked another cigarette.

Matt switched CDs to the Gnarls Barkley album *St. Elsewhere*. The album had recently come out, and we had listened to it several times during the trip. Its first single, "Crazy," was an enormous hit and all over the radio. Listening to the album this last time in the Explorer, I found an entirely new meaning in the music. I felt as if it had been written for me, about the exact experience I was going through.

I remember when, I remember, I remember when I lost my mind. There was somethin' so pleasant about that place.

The passing landscape gradually became more distorted to me. As my hallucinations intensified, the road in front of me seemed to be hovering off the ground

and emerging from beyond some ethereal boundary, maybe a quarter mile in front of me. I couldn't tell whether there was a curve in the road until it came within this proper distance. I found I could shake off this mindset and bring my vision back to normal if I focused hard enough. Then I thought that maybe I was supposed to be seeing in this new way, that this could be the purpose of my having this experience.

Yeah, I was out of touch, but it wasn't because I didn't know enough. I just knew too much.

I thought this ordeal had been designed to cleanse me somehow and to help make me more clearly aware of some transcendental truth. I began to think what was going on was less of a threat than I had assumed and more of an initiation. I remembered a quote I had found on an official Freemason website: "The real secret of Freemasonry: making good men better."

Come on now. Who do you, who do you, who do you, who do you think you are? Ha ha ha. Bless your soul. You really think you're in control?

I was still directly behind the tractor-trailer when it rapidly slowed down. I closed in on the truck's rear, and then it accelerated farther ahead. The truck got fairly far in front of us, and then its driver pressed on the brakes. I got close to the truck's rear, and then the truck sped up again. The tractor-trailer continued to brake sharply and then speed up once I got close to it. Since I felt I was supposed to be following the semi, when it would gain too much distance from us, I would speed up and catch back up with it. As this pattern of acceleration and deceleration went on, I became fixated on the truck's taillights. I would get close to the back of the truck, and it would slow down, its brake lights illuminating. And then I would brake. Its brake lights would go off, and it would accelerate. Then I would accelerate, too, and it seemed to me that this was how things

were supposed to happen. I recall thinking it was like me and the tractor-trailer were dancing.

Maybe I'm crazy. Maybe you're crazy. Maybe we're crazy. Probably.

Eventually, everything besides the road and the truck began to fade into the fringes of my perception. I began to see a white light that would appear next to the truck's left taillight as I approached the truck's rear. I perceived the white light as a signal for me to go faster and get even closer to the truck. I thought I was about to drive into the back of the semi, and then Matt said, "Don't get so close to it."

I slowed down until the truck was a safe distance in front of us, and then I sped back up and got nearer it again and saw the white light again. I accelerated more. This time, the white light went away when the semi began braking, and I slowed down. The light from the Explorer's headlights reflecting off of the metal door panels on the back of the truck moved impossibly and formed complex organic shapes. I began to think I was seeing through the trailer's back doors. I thought I saw the shadows of indiscernible humanoid beings, only momentarily, as if the beings were inside the trailer, but these images faded quickly and did not return. I saw the white light next to the truck's taillight again, and I sped up again.

"Why are you getting so close to it?" Matt asked.

Life is a one-way street, ain't it? If you could paint it, I'd draw myself goin' in the right direction. So I go all the way like I really, really know, but the truth is I'm only guessin'.

I slowed down, but I stayed near the truck. I assumed I was required to stay just close enough to keep cars from getting between us. I felt my mind begin to detach further from my body and my surroundings. I had to struggle to retain sufficient

awareness of the situation.

I'm on the line. I'm on the line. Once I clean my mirror I'm-a be feelin' fine.

I thought everything was moving along a set, unalterable path. I felt like the Explorer would drive itself if I took my hands from the wheel. I believed it was already driving itself. My hands slowly lowered to the bottom of the steering wheel and then fell into my lap, but I immediately grabbed the wheel again, unable to remember if I had intentionally removed my hands or if they had fallen inadvertently.

There's a rhythm deep inside of you, and you must get reacquainted.

The truck started to go notably faster. We were going about eighty mph, and the truck was still gaining distance. I stayed behind, hoping that it would continue on without me, that maybe I had passed this phase of the test. Then my seatbelt tightened again. It did not loosen until I had accelerated and was catching back up with the truck.

The Gnarl's Barkley album had finished by this point, and Matt had changed CDs to a mesmeric electronic album. We were on a two-lane stretch of I-40, and the truck I was following changed lanes, getting in front of a car. There was little space between the truck's rear and the front of this car, but still, I thought I was supposed to stay directly behind the truck. I sped up and switched lanes, maneuvering the Explorer between the truck and the car.

The truck kept changing lanes and leaving continually decreasing distances between it and the vehicles it pulled in front of, and I stayed close behind the truck the entire time. I had become so delirious I had stopped swallowing. Spit was dribbling out of the sides of my mouth and down my chin.

The truck maintained its speed, and I was still on its tail. The truck merged to the right, getting in front of another tractor-trailer, and I believed there was not enough

room between the two trucks for the Explorer to merge. Even so, I felt I was required to attempt merging.

I closed my eyes and turned the steering wheel to the right. When I opened my eyes, we were safely behind the truck again. It shifted back into the left lane and I followed. I was unsure how we had avoided wrecking, as I had been certain we would crash into one of the trucks when we changed lanes.

I stayed behind the truck, and eventually, its turn signal came back on. There was another semi directly to the Explorer's right. The truck in front of us shifted into the right lane, and there was only a very small amount of space between it and the semi it got in front of. I sped up, intending on merging between these trucks. I kept my eyes open and swerved to the right, but at the last second, I cut the wheel back to the left. I was too afraid to do it.

The truck we were following shifted back into the left lane, getting directly in front of us. After a few minutes, we were driving alongside another semi. I saw the turn signal of the truck we were following come on again, and I drove up very close to the truck's rear. There barely seemed to be enough room for the truck in front of us to merge. The semi in front of us changed lanes, and with my eyes open, I swerved to the right. The Explorer collided with the semi behind the one we were following. There was an intense crash and then tires were screeching. And at some point, the Explorer started to roll.

I kept my eyes open. I gripped the steering wheel, my arms stiffening, as my view of the world through the windshield began to spin. We are uncertain how many times we rolled. The Explorer's windows were shattering, and I felt shards of glass hit my face and arms. Finally, there was another collision on the passenger side, and the Explorer

came to a stop right-side up. We had rolled down a grassy incline, hit a tree, bounced off, and come to a stop facing the interstate. The airbags didn't deploy.

The first thing I remember happening after we wrecked is that Mikael asked Matt and I whether we were okay, and I don't remember saying anything back to Mikael. Matt said that his leg might have been hurt but that he was pretty sure he was all right. The next thing I remember is that a man was running toward us from the side of the road. He was yelling, asking whether anyone was hurt. Mikael got out of the Explorer and told him everybody seemed to be fine.

I thought all of this was supposed to happen and that the man who ran up to us was in on all of this, too. I thought that the test was over, that now I would be told what all of this had been about. For a moment, I thought Mikael and this new guy were talking to one another as if they were old friends. Then I heard him ask Mikael where we were coming from and whether we were on any drugs. I thought this was an act and assumed the test must still be going on.

I don't remember saying anything after the wreck until I said "No, sir" to the man who had run up to us, when he asked me whether I wanted a cigarette. I called him sir because I thought he was some authority.

From right after we had wrecked until he offered me the cigarette, it seemed like fifteen minutes, and during this time, I sat in the driver's seat, practically motionless, my hands in my lap, staring straight ahead, only nodding inconsiderably when asked if I was all right. As I sat there, frozen, I actually wondered whether I had just died in the wreck. The cup of water that had been in my lap had spilled when the Explorer was rolling, and the steering wheel and instrument panel were covered with water. But I had forgotten the cup had been between my legs. I did not know what this liquid was, and I

thought it might be my own blood. Broken glass littered the Explorer's interior. I felt no pain, but there was an odd sensation in my left arm. I envisaged strips of my face missing and chunks of my skull exposed. The rearview mirror was no longer attached to the car, and the side-view mirrors were also missing. I had no reflective surfaces in which to see myself, so I did not check to see whether I had been visibly injured. And I feared I would feel bloody bone if I reached up to touch my face.

After he offered me a cigarette, the guy who came running up to us asked me, "Are you okay, man?"

"I think so," I answered slowly.

He walked back to Mikael and they continued talking. I reached out and touched the liquid on the steering wheel, but I could not tell whether it was blood or something else. I was relieved I could move without pain, but I thought I might just be anesthetized by the adrenaline and drugs. I looked over at Matt. He was sitting still, looking out the side window.

"Is your leg alright?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "I think so."

"Can you move it?"

"Yeah." He lifted his leg. "It kind of hurts, though." His flip-flops were off, and I could see fresh blood and broken glass on the foot of the leg he said was hurting.

"Your foot's cut," I said.

"It's not bad. Don't worry about it." He tried to open his door. "My door's stuck."

I heard the two outside talk about leaking gasoline. I thought Mikael might flick a cigarette in the wrong place and cause an explosion. I slowly sat up straight, stretched out my arms, and brushed the glass off of me. With effort, I opened my door. I carefully

put my feet on the ground and was happy to find I could stand. I looked at my left arm, which still felt funny, but I only looked at it for a moment, afraid I might find a horrible wound. It seemed to be fine.

I looked back in the Explorer at Matt.

“Do you think you can get out?” I asked him.

“I don't know. I don't want to chance it with the leg.”

“What was that about gas?” I asked Mikael.

“We were wondering if there might be a gas leak,” he said.

I thought that Matt needed medical attention for his leg and that we all needed to get away from the Explorer as soon as possible because it was leaking gas. I saw a semi parked on the side of the interstate, about a hundred yards ahead of us, and I assumed this was the truck I had hit, although it appeared undamaged from a distance. There were orange reflective warning triangles set up behind it.

I started to walk toward the semi. The area around me was very dark, and the stand of trees alongside the interstate seemed menacing and full of unknown dangers. The tall, wet grass made strange sounds as I walked through it, and the soft ground felt like flesh beneath my shoes. I heard the sound of dogs running toward me from behind me. I looked over my shoulder and saw no dogs, but I thought they were only camouflaged by the tall grass and the dark. I ran as fast as I could the rest of the way to the truck.

When I got there, I saw the insignia on the side of its trailer and on the cab's passenger-side door: a white star in a blue circle over a bar of red, white, and blue stripes. Underneath this emblem was written “USA TRUCK.” I thought it was a United States military truck, but I have learned since that USA Truck, Inc. is a civilian trucking

company. I ran in front of the truck, waved my arms, and motioned for the driver to open the cab's passenger-side door.

"My friend needs help!" I yelled up to the driver after he had opened the door. "I think his leg is hurt. Could you call in some help for him?"

"I've already put in a call," he told me calmly. "Everybody's on the way."

I wondered whom he had called. I wondered who was on the way. I kept checking over my shoulder for dogs.

"Is your truck okay?" I asked.

"Just a little fender damage on my left side," he said. "Nothing serious."

Parked farther up on the side of the interstate from the semi, I saw the Ryder moving truck the man who had run up to us after the wreck had been driving. The tractor-trailer driver closed his door, and I sprinted back to where we had wrecked, still afraid that dogs were after me. And I wanted to hastily get back to everyone to get them away from the Explorer, which I thought was about to explode. When I got back, Mikael and the Ryder-truck guy were looking under the Explorer.

"We need to get away from the truck, y'all!" I shouted. "Let's get Matt out of there!"

"I think I'll just stay put, Jesse," said Matt, who was still in the Explorer's front passenger seat.

"This could blow any second," I insisted. "It's the gas, goddamit! We've got to get you out of there."

"Dude, there isn't any gas," said Mikael. "We would smell it."

"Matt, we're getting you out of there, man!" I went to the driver's-side front door. "Here. I'll help you out. Come on." I leaned inside and let Matt wrap his arm around my

shoulders. Awkwardly, he managed his way out of the Explorer. "We should all get away from it. Let's go over there," I ordered, pointing to a spot on the grassy slope next to the road, a good distance from the wreck. I was propping up Matt, who was standing on one foot. Mikael got on the other side of him.

"Jesse, we're fine right here," Mikael said. "I promise."

"I don't trust it," I told him. I had a premonition. I could see and feel the truck exploding in a ball of flame. I pulled Matt along and Mikael helped support him. We went to the grassy slope, and when we got there, I became anxious about being so close to the road. The sound of the vehicles speeding past us scared me. I thought one of them was going to run off the road and hit us. I became convinced part of the test was that my life would be threatened again by another automobile accident. Suddenly, I heard squealing tires and a deafening crash. I thought a semi was barreling off of the interstate and coming toward us. Matt was sitting close to the road, on the grassy slope, and I ran over to him, grabbed him under his arms, pulled him up, and ran with him away from the road.

"Whoa!" Matt cried out. "Careful, Jesse!"

"What the fuck are you doing?" Mikael yelled.

I held onto Matt and looked around, seeing no new wreck.

"Where's that wreck?" I asked frenziedly. "Where's the truck that just wrecked?"

The Ryder-truck guy came over to me. "Don't freak out," he said. "You've gotta watch it, man. They take note of that sort of stuff." I thought he was referring to whoever was watching me, to whoever was judging my performance in this test. "Listen. Sit down." We both sat down. "So, a cop's gonna show up eventually, and he'll ask what happened. Are you listening?"

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“You’re gonna tell him that your front right tire blew out. Tell him your car swerved right and then hit the truck and crashed. When he asks you why you’re acting or talking strange, tell him your head got knocked around. Tell him you were shaken up by the wreck. Do ya got all that?”

“Yes, sir.”

I remember the others discussing who we should tell the cop was driving, and then I said, “I’m taking responsibility.”

The Ryder-truck guy laughed and said, “Well, you’re going to have to. You don’t have any other options.”

After a while, I announced, “I have to piss.”

“Well, take a piss,” Matt said, aggravated. He was avoiding eye contact with me.

I walked to a tree and stood there, and then I began to urinate in my pants. I thought that, because I had not been told to *not* pee in my pants, I was supposed to do so. I stopped myself after I had emptied about half of my bladder, because something told me my rationale may be skewed, and I unzipped and finished peeing outside of my pants.

I sat down in the grass, away from the other three. They sat and smoked cigarettes and talked. I stayed silent. We waited for a long time, and then an ambulance arrived.

The emergency medical workers examined Matt and Mikael first. They said that Matt’s leg was fine but that it could be tender for the next few days. I did not notice the bleeding gash on Mikael’s heel until he showed it to the medical workers. He told them that, when the accident occurred, he had been lying down in the back seat, dozing off,

and that he had not been wearing his seatbelt.

I told the medical workers my left arm felt odd, and they said it did not seem to be injured. I had minor bruising on my shoulder, where the seatbelt had restrained me. I still feared my head and face were injured, and I asked the medical workers if I seemed hurt at all. They asked me if I felt all right. I asked them if I looked okay. They asked me again if I felt all right, and I said I wasn't sure. They said my arm would probably feel sore for a while. I thought that I was noticeably hurt and that no one was telling me as part of the test. I told the medical workers I had peed myself, and I lied and said I had become so frightened during our wreck that I had lost control of my bladder. I only brought it up because I thought they could smell the urine. My pants were wet and sticking to my legs.

After they finished inspecting the three of us, the emergency medical workers went to their ambulance to wait for the police to arrive.

A single state trooper was the only law enforcement officer that ever came to the wreck, and it took close to another hour for him to show up. Before he arrived, I received two phone calls — one from my friend John and another from a girl I had been talking to at the beginning of the summer. I remember thinking John sounded detached when I told him we had just been in a wreck. I had seen him the night before we left for Memphis, and he had told me to be careful. He had seemed worried. Later, he would tell me he had had a bad feeling about the trip.

“You're a great friend, John,” I told him before ending the call.

I had not talked to the girl that called, Meghan, since the end of May. She had stopped returning my calls, most likely because she did not approve of my drug usage. I do not remember our conversation from after the wreck well, but I do remember her

saying at the end of the call, "See ya when ya get back to Murfreesboro." When we were hanging out together, she had been reading Dan Brown's *Angels & Demons*, the popular book about the Illuminati, and we had discussed the Illuminati and the Freemasons at length. I had told her I felt Dan Brown superficially approaches his books' subject matter and gives his audience a deficient understanding of such secret societies. I did not take it as chance that she was calling after so long, right after this wreck. Everyone in my life was becoming a suspect.

Scared and desperate, I called my mom and told her we had wrecked. I said I needed her to come pick me up. She asked what had happened, and I told her the same thing the Ryder-truck guy told me to tell the police. I wanted to get away from Matt and Mikael and all these other people I thought were conspiring against me, although part of me suspected my mom was in on it, too. She told me to ride back with Matt and said she would pick me up from his house. By this point, the Ryder-truck guy had agreed to give us a ride. I told my mom I would call her when we got to Matt's house.

The state trooper talked with the truck driver and the medical workers first, and then he questioned Matt and Mikael. He talked with me last. He asked me what had happened, and I told him I had been driving. I told him that we were to the left of the semi when our front-right tire blew out and that the Explorer swerved to the right and collided with the truck. I stammered through my explanation, and I apologized to the officer for my incoherency. I told him that my head had been knocked around in the accident and that my nerves had been shaken. He wrote down our names, phone numbers, and other information and then went and sat in his car.

As the Explorer was hoisted onto the back of a tow truck, I finally saw the extent of its damage. The roof was crushed in at an angle toward the hood, the tires were all flat

and hanging off of the wheels, and the only glass on the vehicle that appeared somewhat whole was the windshield, which was crumpled and replete with interlaced webs of splintering cracks. The Explorer was so wobbly that it seemed barely able to stay on the back of the tow truck. The tractor-trailer driver and medical workers had left by this point.

When the state trooper eventually came back out of his car, he gave Matt some paperwork for the insurance claim and told us to drive safer. He said we were free to leave. The state trooper did not administer a field sobriety test or write a traffic ticket.

The four of us crammed into the cab of the Ryder truck, and we started to drive to Matt's house, which turned out to be only a half-hour's drive from where we had wrecked. The entire ride back, I felt like we were going to get into another accident. But we made it back safely. We thanked the Ryder-truck guy for the ride, and right before he left, he said to me, "Enjoy life, brother. Somebody wants you alive."

Mikael and I helped Matt inside because he said his leg still hurt, and we laid him down on a couch in his living room. I called my mom. She told me Marty, her boyfriend, was picking me up because she didn't want to leave the house at such a late hour. It was already near midnight. Before we ended the call, my mom asked me where my car was, and I told her it was at my apartment. Marty arrived, and as I walked out of Matt's house, Matt said to me, "I told you this was gonna be a crazy trip."

Marty asked me what had happened, and I told him the same thing I had told my mom, the same thing I had said to the state trooper. We took the interstate to my mom's house. I did not say much on the ride there, mainly because I felt like we were going to wreck. I thought I was still being tested somehow.

We got to my mom's house, and as soon as I walked through the front door, I

collapsed into my mom's arms, crying hysterically. It took me a few minutes to compose myself. I was indifferent as to whether or not my mom and her boyfriend were Freemasons and conspiring against me in some way. I was just thankful to be somewhere that felt safe and familiar. As I collected myself, my mom became less consoling and more inquisitive. She asked whether I was on any drugs. My mom and I had an ongoing, open dialogue about my drug habits, and I told her all of the drugs I had taken. I did not tell her I thought that I had been followed and that I was the focus of a vast conspiracy.

I went upstairs and took a shower. In the bathroom, I finally looked at myself in the mirror and found that, aside from my slightly bruised shoulder, I was visibly uninjured. I came back downstairs after my shower, and my mom had a cup of hot tea waiting for me. I lay on a couch in her living room, and she and Marty talked on the back porch. I began to feel tired. She came inside and put a blanket over me.

She started to talk to me, but I do not remember what she said. I did not really listen to her or even have the mental endurance left to listen to her. But I do remember that I looked at her when she was speaking to me, and without having to listen, I felt her concern and her sincerity. I sensed a voice beyond hers, too. I received a very clear message from this other voice that I need to take better care of myself, that I need to treat myself with love and respect. I was being told that I might have believed I was caring nicely for myself but that my behaviors suggested I lacked true self-appreciation.

I fell asleep quickly, and the next morning, my mom woke me up and told me she was taking me to a drug rehab clinic. Although this did not seem like a great idea to me, I was too content with being alive to offer anything but agreement. I also knew that my being in the wreck had jolted my mom, and I wanted to do what I could to appease her.

She dropped me off at the clinic early that afternoon, and I went to bed as soon as I finished filling out all of the paperwork. I slept until ten the next morning. Later that day, I called my dad, and he came and picked me up that afternoon. Rehab was not for me. My mom wanted me to stay, but I refused. She stopped giving me an allowance and stopped paying for my tuition. I stayed with my dad at his house for a few weeks to recuperate. It was six days after the wreck before I would tell myself, or anyone else, that parts of my experience might have been drug-induced paranoid delusions.

Addendum

So, what happened next? Well, I looked for answers. I searched for an explanation to what I could not brush off as mere coincidence. I found some answers, but some questions remain unanswered. Something I did learn is this: There is only one way things can be, and that is the way they are.

Also of interest is this text message I received from Matt one night in September, later that year: “Swarthy adj. - having a dark complexion. Look it up.”

I responded with this text: “Whoa. That’s weird.”

He sent another text: “We said that to so many black people.”

A few minutes before this exchange took place, I was discussing *swarthy* with a friend. She kept insisting *swarthy* is an actual word, although she couldn’t remember its definition. I kept insisting that it isn’t a word, that I knew it isn’t a real word. Then Matt sent the text.

Less than a month later, my mom began to explore our family tree on an ancestry website and discovered that her great-grandmother was half-black. She appears to have been born in 1862, in the middle of the Civil War. Her parents’ identities are unknown, and although we are unsure where she was born, she lived and eventually died in Tullahoma, Tennessee. The name of this great-great-grandmother of mine is Jayne, which is also my mother’s name.

And I did look up the word *swarthy*. The Oxford English Dictionary provides

various meanings of the word, including the one Matt mentioned as its primary denotation, and catalogs a related word: *swarth*. One of *swarth*'s definitions is, "The apparition of a dying person; a wraith."