

Big Me

It all started when I was twelve years old. Before that, everything was a peaceful blur of childhood, growing up in the small town of Beck, Nebraska. A “town,” we called it. Really, the population was just less than 200, and it was one of those dots along Highway 30 that people didn't usually even slow down for, though strangers sometimes stopped at the little gas station near the grain elevator, or ate at the cafe. My mother and father owned a bar called "The Crossroads," at the edge of town. We lived in a little house behind it, and behind our house was the junkyard, and beyond that were wheat fields, which ran all the way to a line of bluffs and barren hills, full of yucca and rattlesnakes.

Back then I spent a lot of time in my mind, building a city up toward those hills. This imaginary place was also called "Beck," but it was a metropolis of a million people. The wise though cowardly mayor lived in a mansion in the hills above the interstate, as did the bullish, Teddy Roosevelt-like police commissioner, Winthrop Golding. There were other members of the rich and powerful who lived in enormous old Victorian houses along the bluffs, and many of them harbored dreadful secrets, or were involved in one way or another with the powerful Beck underworld. One wealthy, respectable citizen, Mr. Karaffa, turned out to be a lycanthrope who preyed on the lovely, virginal Junior High School girls, mutilating them beyond recognition, until I shot him with a silver bullet. I was the city Detective, though I was often underappreciated, and, because of my radical notions, in danger of being fired by the cowardly mayor. The police commissioner always defended me, even when he was exasperated by my unorthodox methods.

He respected my integrity.

I don't know how many of my childhood years existed in this imaginary city. Already by the age of eight I had become the Detective, and shortly thereafter I began drawing maps of the metropolis. By the time we left Beck I had a folder six inches thick, full of street guides and architecture and subway schedules. In the real town, I was known as the strange kid who wandered around talking to himself. Old people would find me in their backyard garden and come out and yell at me. Children would see me playing on their swing sets, and when they came out to challenge me, I would run away. I trapped people's cats and bound their arms and legs, harshly forcing confessions from them. Since no one locked their doors, I went into people's houses and stole things, which I pretended were clues to the mystery I was trying to solve.

Everyone real also played a secret role in my city. My parents, for example, were the landlord and his wife, who lived downstairs from my modest one-room flat. They were well-meaning but unimaginative people, and I was polite to them. There were a number of comic episodes in which the nosy landlady had to be tricked and defeated. My brother Mark was the district attorney, my nemesis. My younger sister Debbie was my secretary, Miss Debbie, whom I sometimes loved. I would marry her if I weren't such a lone wolf.

My family thought of me as a certain person, a figure I knew well enough to act out on occasion. Now that they are far away, it sometimes hurts to think that we knew so little of one another. Sometimes I think: if no one knows you, then you are no one.

In the spring of my twelfth year, a man moved into a house at the end of my block. The house had belonged to an old woman who had died and left her home, fully furnished but tenantless for years, until her heir had finally gotten around to having the estate liquidated, the old furniture sold, the place cleared out and put up for sale. This had been the house I took cats to, the hideout where I extracted their yowling confessions. Then finally the house was emptied and the man took up residence.

I first saw the man in what must have been late May. The lilac bush in his front yard was in full bloom, thick with spade-shaped leaves and clusters of perfumed flowers. The man was mowing the lawn as I passed, and I stopped to stare.

It immediately struck me that there was something familiar about him--the wavy dark hair and gloomy eyes, the round face and dimpled chin. At first I thought he looked like someone I'd seen on TV. And then, as I looked at him, I realized: He looked like me! Or rather, he looked like an older version of me-- me grown up. As he got closer with his push lawnmower, I was aware that our eyes were the same odd, pale shade of grey, that we had the same map of freckles across the bridge of our nose, the same stubby fingers. He lifted his hand solemnly as he reached the edge of his lawn, and I lifted my opposite hand, so that for a moment we were mirror images of one another. I felt terribly worked up and began to hurry home.

That night, considering the encounter, I wondered whether the man actually *was* me. I thought about all that I'd heard about Time Travel, and considered the possibility that my older self had come back for some unknown purpose--perhaps to save me from some mistake I was about to make, or to warn me. Maybe he was fleeing some future disaster, and hoped to change

the course of things.

I suppose this tells you a lot about what I was like as a boy, but these were among the first ideas I considered. I believed wholeheartedly in the notion that time travel would soon be a reality, just as I believed in UFO's and ESP and Bigfoot. I used to worry, in all seriousness, whether humanity would last as long as the dinosaurs lasted. What if we were just a brief, passing phase on the planet? I felt strongly that we needed to explore other solar systems, and establish colonies. The survival of the human species was very important to me.

Perhaps it was because of this that I began to keep a journal. I had recently read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and had been deeply moved by the idea that a piece of you, words on a page, could live on after you were dead. I imagined that, after a nuclear holocaust, an extraterrestrial boy might find my journal, floating among some bits of meteorite and pieces of buildings and furniture that had once been Earth. The extraterrestrial boy would translate my diary, and it would become a bestseller on his planet. Eventually, the aliens would be so stirred by my story that they would call off the intergalactic war they were waging and make a truce.

In these journals I would frequently write messages to myself, a person whom I addressed as "Big Me," or "The Future Me." Rereading these entries as the addressee, I try not to be insulted, since my former self admonishes me frequently. "*I hope you are not a failure,*" he says. "*I hope you are happy,*" he says.

I'm trying to remember what was going on in the world when I was twelve. My brother Mark says it was the worst year of his life. He remembers it as a year of terrible fights between my parents. "They were drunk every night, up till three and four in the morning, screaming at

each other. Do you remember the night Mom drove the car into the tree?"

I don't. In my mind, they seemed happy together, in the bantering, ironic manner of sitcom couples, and their arguments seemed full of comedy, as if a laugh track might ring out after their best put-down lines. I don't recall them drunk so much as expansive, and the bar seemed a cheerful, popular place, always full, though they would go bankrupt not long after I turned 13.

Mark says that was the year that he tried to commit suicide, and I don't recall that either, though I do remember that he was in the hospital for a few days. Mostly, I think of him reclining on the couch, looking regal and dissipated, reading books like "I'm Okay, You're Okay," and taking questionnaires which told him whether he was normal or not.

The truth is, I mostly recall the Detective. He had taken an interest in the mysterious stranger who had moved in down the block. The Stranger, it turned out, would be teaching 7th grade science; he would be replacing the renowned girl's basketball coach and science teacher, Mr. Karaffa, who'd had a heart attack and died right after a big game. The Stranger was named Louis Mickleson, and he'd moved to Beck from a big city: Chicago or maybe Omaha. "He seems like a lonely type of guy," my mother commented once.

"A weirdo, you mean?" said my father.

I knew how to get into Mickleson's house. It had been my hideout, and there were a number of secret entrances: loose windows, the cellar door, the back door lock which could be dislodged with the thin, laminated edge of my library card.

He was not a very orderly person, Mr. Mickleson, or perhaps he was simply uncertain.

The house was full of boxes, packed and unpacked, and the furniture was placed randomly about the house, as if he'd simply left things where the moving men had set them down. In various corners of the house were projects he'd begun and then abandoned--tilting towers of stacked books next to an empty bookcase, silverware organized in rows along the kitchen counter, a pile of winter coats left on the floor near a closet. The boxes seemed to be carefully classified. Near his bed, for example, were socks--underwear--white tee-shirts--each in a separate box, neatly folded near a drawerless dresser. The drawers themselves lay on the floor and contained reams of magazines that he'd saved, Popular Science in one, Isaac Azimov's Science Fiction Magazine in another, Playboy in yet another, though the dirty pictures had all been fastidiously scissored out.

You can imagine that this was like a cave of wonders for me, piled high with riches, with clues, and each box almost trembled with mystery. There was a collection of costume jewelry, and old coins and keys; here were his old lesson plans and grade books, the names of former students penciled in alongside their attendance and grades and small comments ("messy"; "lazy"; "shows potential!") racked up in columns. Here were photos and letters: a gold mine!

One afternoon, I was kneeling before his box of letters when I heard the front door open. Naturally, I was very still. I heard the front door close, and then Mr. Mickleson muttering to himself. I tensed as he said, "Okay, well, never mind," and read aloud from a bit of junk mail he'd gotten, using a nasal, theatrical voice: " 'A special gift for you enclosed!' How lovely! " he mocked. I crouched there over his cardboard box, looking at a boyhood photo of him and what must have been his sister, circa 1952, sitting in the lap of an artificially bearded Santa. I heard

him chuckling as he opened the freezer and took something out. Then he turned on the TV in the living room, and voices leapt out at me.

It never felt like danger. I was convinced of my own powers of stealth and invisibility. He would not see me because that was not part of the story I was telling myself: I was the Detective! I sensed a cool, hollow spot in my stomach but I could glide easily behind him as he sat in his La-Z-Boy recliner, staring at the blue glow of the television, watching the news. He didn't shudder as the dark shape of me passed behind him. He couldn't see me unless I chose to be seen.

I had my first blackout that day I left Mickleson's house, not long after I'd sneaked behind him and crept out the back door. I don't know whether "blackout" is the best term, with its redolence of alcoholic excess and catatonic states, but I'm not sure what else to say. I stepped into the backyard and I remember walking cautiously along a line of weedy flowerbeds toward the gate that led to the alley. I had taken the Santa photo and I stared at it. It could have been a photograph of me when I was five, and I shuddered at the eerie similarity. An obese calico cat was hurrying down the alley in front of me, disappearing into a hedge that bordered someone else's backyard.

A few seconds later, I found myself at the kitchen table eating dinner with my family. I was in the process of bringing an ear of buttered corn to my mouth and it felt something like waking up, only faster, as if I'd been transported in a blink from one place to another. My family had not seemed to notice that I was gone. They were all eating silently, grimly, as if everything were normal. My father was cutting his meat, his jaw firmly locked, and my mother's eyes were

on her plate, as if she were watching a small round television. No one seemed surprised by my sudden appearance.

It was kind of alarming. At first, it just seemed odd--like, "Oh, how did I get here?" But then, the more I thought about it, the more my skin crawled. I looked up at the clock on the kitchen wall, a grinning black cat with a clock face for a belly and a pendulum tail and eyes that shifted from left to right with each tick. I had somehow lost a considerable amount of time--at least a half hour, maybe forty-five minutes. The last thing I clearly recalled was staring at that photo--Mr. Mickleson or myself, sitting on Santa's knee. And then, somehow, I had left my body. I sat there, thinking, but there wasn't even a blur of memory. There was only a blank spot.

Once, I tried to explain it to my wife.

"A *blank spot*?" she said, and her voice grew stiff and concerned, as if I'd found a lump beneath my skin. "Do you mean a blackout? You have *blackouts*?"

"No, no," I said and tried to smile reassuringly. "Not exactly."

"What do you mean?" she said. "Listen, Andy," she said. "If I told you that I had periods when I...lost time...wouldn't you be concerned? Wouldn't you want me to see a doctor?"

"You're blowing this all out of proportion," I said. "It's nothing like that." And I wanted to tell her about the things that the Detective had read about in the weeks and months following the first incident--about trances and transcendental states, about astral projection and out-of-the-body travel. But I didn't.

"There's nothing wrong with me," I said, and stretched my arms luxuriously. "I feel great," I said. "It's more like daydreaming. Only--a little different."

But she still looked concerned. "You don't have to hide anything from me," she said. "I just care about you, that's all."

"I know," I said, and I smiled as her eyes scoped my face. "It's nothing," I said, "just one of those little quirks!" and that is what I truly believe. Though my loved ones sometimes tease me about my distractedness, my forgetfulness, they do so affectionately. There haven't been any major incidents, and the only times that really worry me are the times when I am alone, when I am driving down one street and wake up on another. And even then, I am sure that nothing terrible has happened. I sometimes rub my hands against the steering wheel. I am always intact. There are no screams or sirens in the distance. It's just one of those things! .

But back then, that first time, I was frightened. I remember asking my mother how a person would know if he had a brain tumor.

"You don't have a brain tumor," she said irritably. "It's time for bed."

A little later, perhaps feeling guilty, she came up to my room with aspirin and water.

"Do you have a headache, honey?" she said.

I shook my head as she turned off my bedside lamp. "Too much reading of comic books," she said, and smiled at me exaggeratedly, as she sometimes did, pretending I was still a baby. "It would make anybody's head feel funny, Little Man!" She touched my forehead with the cold, dry pads of her fingertips, looking down into my eyes, heavily. She looked sad, and for a moment lost her balance slightly as she reached down to run a palm across my cheek.

"Nothing is wrong," she whispered. "It will all seem better in the morning."

That night, I sat up writing in my diary, writing to Big Me: *I hope you are alive*, I wrote. *I*

hope that I don't die before you are able to read this.

That particular diary entry always makes me feel philosophical. I'm not entirely sure of the person he is writing to, the future person he was imagining. I don't know whether that person is alive or not. There are so many people we could become, and we leave such a trail of bodies through our teens and twenties that's it's hard to tell which one is us. How many versions do we abandon over the years? How many end up nearly forgotten, mumbling and gasping for air in some tenement room of our consciousness like elderly relatives suffering some fatal lung disease?

Like the Detective. As I wander through my big suburban house at night, I can hear his wheezing breath in the background, still muttering about secrets that can't be named. Still hanging in there.

My wife is curled up on the sofa, sipping hot chocolate, reading, and when she looks up she smiles shyly. "What are you staring at?" she says. She is used to this sort of thing, by now-- finds it endearing, I think. She is a pleasant, practical woman, and I doubt that she would find much of interest in the many former selves that tap against my head, like moths.

She opens her robe. "See anything you like?" she says, and I smile back at her.

"Just peeking," I say brightly. My younger self wouldn't recognize me, I'm sure of that.

Which makes me wonder: What did I see in Mickleson, beyond the striking resemblance? I can't quite remember my train of thought, though it's clear from the diary that I latched wholeheartedly onto the idea. Some of it is obviously playacting, making drama for myself, but

some of it isn't. Something about Mickleson struck a chord.

Maybe it was simply this-- *July 13: If Mickleson is your future, then you took a wrong turn somewhere. Something is sinister about him! He could be a criminal on the lam! He is crazy. You have to change your life now! Don't ever think bad thoughts about Mom, Dad or even Mark. Do a good deed every day.*

I had been going to his house fairly frequently by that time. I had a notebook, into which I had pasted the Santa photo, a sample of his handwriting and a bit of hair from a comb. I tried to write down everything that seemed potentially significant: clues, evidence, but evidence of what, I don't know. There was the crowd of beer cans on his kitchen counter, sometimes arranged in geometric patterns. There were the boxes, unpacked then packed again. There were letters: "I am tired, unbelievably tired, of going around in circles with you," a woman who signed herself "Kelly" had written. "As far as I can see, there is no point in going on. Why can't you just make a decision and stick to it?" I had copied this down in my detective's notebook.

In his living room, there was a little plaque hanging on the wall. It was a rectangular piece of dark wood; a piece of parchment paper, burned around the edges, had been lacquered to it. On the parchment paper, in careful, calligraphy letters, was written:

"I wear
the chain
I forged
in life."

Which seemed like a possible secret message. I thought maybe he'd escaped from jail.

From a distance, behind a hedge, I watched Mickleson's house. He wouldn't usually appear before 10 o'clock in the morning. He would pop out of his front door in his bathrobe,

glancing quickly around as if he sensed someone watching, and then he would snatch up the newspaper on his doorstep. At times, he seemed aware of my eyes.

I knew I had to be cautious. Mickleson must not guess that he was being investigated, and I tried to take precautions. I stopped wearing my favorite detective hat, to avoid calling attention to myself. When I went through his garbage, I did it in the early morning, while I was fairly certain he was still asleep. Even so, one July morning I was forced to crawl under a thick hedge when Mickleson's back door unexpectedly opened at eight a.m. and he shuffled out the alley to dump a bag into his trash can. Luckily I was wearing brown and green and blended in with the shrubbery. I lay there, prone against the dirt, staring at his bare feet and hairy ankles. He was wearing nothing but boxer shorts. I could see that his clothes had been concealing a large quantity of dark, vaguely sickening body hair; there was even some on his back! I had recently read a Classics Illustrated comic book version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and I recalled the description of Hyde as "something troglodytic," which was a word I had looked up in the dictionary and now applied as Mickleson dumped his bag into the trash can. I had just begun to grow a few hairs on my own body, and was chilled to think I would end up like this. I heard the clank of beer cans, and then he walked away and I lay still, feeling uneasy.

At home, after dinner, I would sit in my bedroom, reading through my notes, puzzling. I would flip through my lists, trying to find clues I could link together. I'd sift through the cigar box full of things I'd taken from his home: photographs, keys, a Swiss army knife, a check stub with his signature, which I'd compared against my own. But nothing seemed to fit. All I knew was that he was mysterious. He had some secret.

Once, one late night that summer, I thought I heard my parents talking about me. I was

reading, and their conversation had been mere background, rising and falling, until I heard the my name. "Andrew...how he's turning out...not fair to anybody! " Words, rising through the general mumble, first in my father's, then my mother's voice. Then, loudly: "What will happen to him?"

I sat up straight, my heart beating heavily, because it seemed that something must have happened, they must have discovered something. I felt certain that I was about to be exposed: my spying, my breaking and entering, my stealing. I was quiet, frightened, listening, and then after a while I got up and crept downstairs.

My mother and father were at the kitchen table, speaking softly, staring at the full ashtray that sat between them. My mother looked up when I came in and clenched her teeth. "Oh, for God's sake," she said. "Andy, it's two-thirty in the morning! What are you doing up?"

I stood there in the doorway, uncertainly. I wished that I were a little kid again, to tell her that I was scared. But I just hovered there. "I couldn't sleep," I said.

My mother frowned. "Well, try harder, God damn it, " she said.

I stood there a moment longer. "Mom?" I said.

"Go to bed!" She glared.

"I thought I heard you guys saying something about that man that just moved in down the block. He didn't say anything about me, did he?"

"Listen to me, Andrew," she said. Her look darkened. "I don't want you up there listening to our conversations. This is grown-up talk and I don't want you up there snooping."

"He's going to be the new science teacher," I said.

"I know," she said, but my father raised his eyebrows.

"Who's this?" my father said, raising his glass to his lips. "That weirdo is supposed to be a teacher? That's a laugh."

"Oh, don't start!" my mother said. "At least he's a customer! You better god damn not pick a fight with him. You've driven enough people away as it is, the way you are. It's no wonder we don't have any friends!" Then she turned on me. "I thought I told you to go to bed. Don't just stand there gaping when I tell you something! My God, I can't get a minute's peace!"

Back in my bedroom, I tried to forget what my parents had said--it didn't matter, I thought, as long as they didn't know anything about me. I was safe! And I sat there, relieved, slowly forgetting the fact that I was really just a strange 12-year-old boy, a kid with no real playmates, an outsider even in his own family. I didn't like being that person, and I sat by the window, awake, listening to my parents' slow-arguing voices downstairs, smelling the smoke that hung in a thick, rippling cloud over their heads. Outside, the lights of Beck melted into the dark fields, the hills were heavy, huddled shapes against the sky. I closed my eyes, wishing hard, trying to will my imaginary city into life, envisioning roads and streetlights suddenly sprouting up through the prairie grass. And tall buildings. And freeways. And people.

It has been almost 20 years since I last saw Beck. We left the town in the summer before eighth grade, after my parents had gone bankrupt, and in the subsequent years we moved through a blur of ugly states--Wyoming, Montana; Panic, Despair--while my parents' marriage dissolved.

Now we are all scattered. My sister, Debbie, suffered brain damage in a car accident when she was 19, out driving with her friends. She now lives in a group home in Denver, where she and the others spend their days making Native American jewelry to sell at truck stops. My

brother, Mark, is a physical therapist who lives on a houseboat in Marina Del Rey, California. He spends his free time reading books about childhood trauma, and every time I talk to him, he has a series of complaints about our old misery: at the very least, surely I remember the night that my father was going to kill us all with his gun, how he and Debbie and I ran into the junkyard and hid in an old refrigerator box? I think he's exaggerating, but Mark is always threatening to have me hypnotized, so I'll remember.

We have all lost touch with my mother. The last anyone heard, she was living in Puerto Vallarta, married to a man who apparently has something to do with real estate development. The last time I talked to her, she didn't sound like herself: a Caribbean lilt had crept into her voice. She laughed harshly, then began to cough, when I mentioned old times.

For a time before he died, I was closest to my father. He was working as a bartender in a small town in Idaho and he used to call me when I was in law school. Like me, he remembered Beck fondly: The happiest time of his life, he said. "If only we could have held on a little bit longer," he told me. "It would have been a different story. A different story entirely. "

Then he'd sigh. "Well, anyway," he'd say. "How are things going with Katrina?"

"Fine," I'd say. "Just the usual. She's been a little distant lately. She's very busy with her classes. I think med school takes a lot out of her."

I remember shifting silently because the truth was, I didn't really have a girlfriend named Katrina. I didn't have a girlfriend, period. I made Katrina up one evening, on the spur of the moment, to keep my dad from worrying so much. It helped him to think that I had a woman looking after me, that I was heading into a normal life of marriage, children, a house, etc. Now that I have such things, I feel a bit guilty. He died not knowing the truth. He died waiting to

meet her, enmeshed in my made-up drama-- in the last six months of his life, Katrina and I came close to breaking up, got back together, discussed marriage, worried that we were not spending enough time together. The conversations that my father and I had about Katrina were some of the best we ever had.

I don't remember much about my father from that summer when I was twelve. We certainly weren't having conversations that I can recall, and I don't ever recall that he pursued me with a gun. He was just there: I walked past him in the morning as he sat, sipping coffee, preparing to go to work. I'd go into the bar and he would pour me a glass of coke with bitters "to put hair on my chest." I'd sit there on the barstool stroking Suds, the bar's tomcat, in my lap, murmuring quietly to him as I imagined my detective story. My father had a bit part in my imagination, barely a speaking role.

But it was at the bar that I saw Mr. Mickleson again. I had been at his house that morning, working through a box of letters, and then I'd been out at the junkyard behind our house. In those unenlightened times, it was called The Dump. People drove out and pitched their garbage over the edge of a ravine, which had become encrusted with a layer of beer cans, broken toys, bedsprings, car parts, broken glass. It was a magical place, and I'd spent a few hours in the driver's seat of a rusted out Studebaker, fiddling with the various dashboard knobs, pretending to drive it, to stalk suspects, to become involved in a thrilling high speed chase. At last I had come to the bar to unwind, to drink my coke and bitters and recreate the day in my imagination. Occasionally, my father would speak to me and I would be forced to reluctantly disengage myself from the Detective, who was brooding over a glass of bourbon. He had become hardened

and cynical, but he would not give up his fight for justice.

I was repeating these stirring lines in my mind when Mr. Mickleson came into the bar. I felt a little thrum when he entered. My grip tightened on Suds the cat, who struggled and sprang from my lap.

Having spent time in The Crossroads, I recognized drunkenness. I was immediately aware of Mickleson's flopping gait, the way he settled heavily against the lip of the bar. "Okay, okay," he muttered to himself, then chuckled. "No, just forget it, never mind," he said cheerfully. Then he sighed and tapped his hand against the bar. "Shot o' rum," he said. "Captain Morgan, if you have it. No ice." I watched as my father served him, then flicked my glance away when Mickleson looked warily in my direction. He leveled his gaze at me, his eyes heavy with some meaning I couldn't decipher. It was part friendly, that look, but part threatening, too, in a particularly intimate way--as if he recognized me.

"Oh, hello," Mr. Mickleson said. "If it isn't the staring boy! Hello, Staring Boy!" He grinned at me, and my father gave him a stern look. "I believe I know you," Mr. Mickleson said jauntily. "I've seen you around, haven't I?"

I just sat there, blushing. It occurred to me that perhaps, despite my precautions, Mr. Mickleson had seen me after all. "Staring Boy," he said, and I tried to think of when he might have caught me staring. How many times? I saw myself from a distance, watching his house but now also being watched, and the idea set up a panic in me that was difficult to quell. I was grateful that my father came over and called me son. "Son," he said, "Why don't you go on outside and find something to do? You may as well enjoy some of that summer sunshine before school starts."

"All right," I said. I saw that Mickleson was still grinning at me expectantly, his eyes blank and unblinking, and I realized that he was doing an imitation of my own expression-- Staring Boy, meet Staring Man. I tried to step casually off the barstool, but instead stumbled and nearly fell.

"Oopsie-daisy!" Mr. Mickleson said, and my father gave him a hard look, a careful glare that checked Mr. Mickleson's grin. He shrugged.

"Ah, children, children," he said confidently to my father, as I hurried quickly to the door. I heard my father start to speak sharply as I left, but I didn't have the nerve to stick around to hear what was said.

Instead, I crept along the outside of the bar; I staked out Mickleson's old Volkswagen, and found it locked. There were no windows into the bar, and so I pressed myself against the wall, trying to listen. I tried to think what I would write in my notebook: that look he'd given me, his grinning mimicry of my stare. I believe I know you, he'd said: What, exactly, did he know?

And then I had a terrible thought. Where was the notebook? I imagined, for a moment, that I had left it there, on the bar, next to my drink. I had the horrifying image of Mr. Mickleson's eyes falling on it, the theme book cover, which was decorated with stylized question marks, and on which I'd written: ANDY O'DAY MYSTERY SERIES #67: THE DETECTIVE MEETS THE DREADFUL DOUBLE! I saw him smiling at it, opening it, his eyes narrowing as he saw his photo pasted there on the first page.

But it wasn't in the bar. I was sure it wasn't, because I remembered not having it when I went in. I didn't have it with me, I knew, and I began to backtrack, step by step, from the Studebaker to lunchtime to my bedroom and then I saw it, with the kind of perfect clarity my

memory has always been capable of, despite everything.

I saw myself in Mickleson's living room, on my knees in front of a box of his letters. I had copied something in the notebook and put it down on the floor. It was right there, next to the box. I could see it as if through a window, and I stood there observing the image in my mind's eye, as my mother came around the corner, into the parking lot.

"Andy!" she said. "I've been calling for you! Where the hell have you been?"

She was in one of her moods. "I am so sick of this!" she said, and gave me a hard shake as she grabbed my arm. "You god-damned lazy kids just think you can do as you please, all the god damn day long! This house is a pig sty, and not a one of you will bend a finger to pick up your filthy clothes or even wash a dish." She gritted her teeth, her voice trembling, and she slammed into the house, where Mark was scrubbing the floor and Debbie was standing at the sink, washing dishes. Mark glared up at me, his eyes red with crying and self-pity and hatred. I knew he was going to hit me as soon as she left. "Clean, you brats!" my mother cried. "I'm going to work, and when I get home I want this house to shine!" She was in the frilly blouse and make up she wore when she tended bar, beautiful and flushed, her eyes hard. "I'm not going to live like this anymore. I'm not going to live this kind of life!"

"She was a toxic parent," Mark says now, in one of our rare phone conversations.

"A real psycho. It haunts me, you know, the shit that we went through. It was like living in a house of terror, you know? Like, you know, a dictatorship or something. You never knew what was next, and that was the scariest part. There was a point, I think, where I really just couldn't take it anymore. I really wanted to die." I listen as he draws on his cigarette and then exhales,

containing the fussy spitefulness that's creeping into his voice. "Not that you'd remember. It always fell on me, whatever it was. They thought you were so cute and spacey, so you were always checked out in La-La Land while I got the brunt of everything."

I listen but don't listen. I'm on the deck behind my house with my cell phone, reclining, watching my daughters jump through the sprinkler. Everything is green and full of sunlight, and I might as well be watching an actor portraying me in the happy ending of a movie of my life. I've never told him about my blackouts and I don't now, though they have been bothering me again lately. I can imagine what he would come up with: Fugue states, repressed memories, multiple personalities. Ridiculous stuff.

"It all seems very far away to me," I tell Mark, which is not true exactly, but it's part of the role I've been playing for many years now. "I don't really think much about it."

This much is true: I barely remember what happened that night. I wasn't even there, among the mundane details of children squabbling and cleaning and my mother's ordinary unhappiness. I was the Detective!--driving my sleek Studebaker through the streets of Beck, nervous though not panicked, edgy and white-knuckled but still planning with steely determination: The notebook! The notebook must be retrieved! Nothing else was really happening, and when I left the house I was in a state of focused intensity.

It must have been about eleven o'clock. Mark had been especially evil and watchful, and it wasn't until he'd settled down in front of the television with a big bowl of ice cream that I could pretend, at last, to go to bed.

Outside, out the door, down the alley: it seems to me that I should have been frightened,

but mostly I recall the heave of adrenaline and determination, the necessity of the notebook, the absolute need for it. It was my story.

The lights were on at Mickleson's house, a bad sign, but I moved forward anyway, into the dense and dripping shadows of his yard, the crickets singing thickly, my hand already extended to touch the knob of his back door.

Which wasn't locked. It didn't even have to be jimmed, it gave under the pressure of my hand, a little electrical jolt across my skin, the door opening smooth and uncreaking, and I passed like a shadow into the narrow back foyer that led to the kitchen. There was a silence in the house, and for a moment I felt certain that Mickleson was asleep. Still, I moved cautiously. The kitchen was brightly florescent and full of dirty dishes and beer cans. I slid my feet along the tile, inching along the wall. Silence, and then Mickleson's voice drifted up suddenly, a low mumble and then a firmer one, as if he were contradicting himself. My heart shrank. Now what? I thought as I came to the edge of the living room.

Mickleson was sitting in his chair, slumping, his foot jiggling with irritation. I heard the sail-like snap of a turning page, and I didn't even have to look to know that the notebook was in his hands. He murmured again as I stood there. I felt lightheaded. The notebook! I thought, and leaned against the wall. I felt my head bump against something, and Mr. Mickleson's plaque tilted, then fell. I fumbled for a moment before I caught it.

But the sound made him turn. There I was, dumbly holding the slice of wood, and his eyes rested on me. His expression seemed to flicker with surprise; then terror; then annoyance-- before settling on a kind of blank amusement. He cleared his throat.

"I believe I see a little person in my house," he said, and I might have fainted. I could

feel the Detective leaving me, shriveling up and slumping to the floor, a suit of old clothes; the city of Beck disintegrated in the distance, streets drying up like old creek-beds, skyscrapers sinking like ocean-liners into the wheat fields. I was very still, his gaze pinning me. "A ghostly little person," he said, with satisfaction. He stood up for a moment, wavering, and then stumbled back against the chair for support, a look of affronted dignity freezing on his face. I didn't move.

"Well, well," he said. "Do I dare assume that I am in the presence of the author of this--" and he waved my notebook vaguely. "--this document?" And he paused, thumbing through it with an exaggerated, mime-like gesture. "Hmm," he murmured, almost crooning. "So--imaginative! And--there's a certain--*charm*--about it--I think." And then he leaned toward me. "And so at last we meet, Detective O'Day!" he said, in a deep voice. "You may call me Professor Moriarty!" He made a strange shape with his mouth and laughed softly-- not sinister exactly but musing, as if he'd just told himself a good joke and I was somehow in on it.

"Why so quiet?" he exclaimed, and waggled the notebook at me. "Haven't you come to find your future, young Detective?" I watched as he pressed his fingers to his temples, like a stage medium. "Hmm," he said, and began to wave his arms and fingers with a seaweed-like floating motion, as if casting a magic spell, or performing a hula dance. "Looking for his future," he said. "What lies in wait for Andy O'Day? I ask myself that question frequently. Will he grow up to be..." --and here he read aloud from my journal-- "...'trogloodytic' and 'sinister?' Will he ever escape the sad and lonely life of a Detective, or will he wander till the end of his days through the grim and withering streets of Beck?"

He paused then and looked up from my journal. I thought for a moment that if I leapt out, I could snatch it from him, even though the things I had written now seemed dirty and

pathetic. I thought to say, "Give me back my notebook!" But I didn't really want it anymore. I just stood there, watching him finger the pages. He leaned toward me, wavering, his eyes not exactly focused on me, but on some part of my forehead or shoulder or hair. He smiled, made another small effort to stand, then changed his mind. "What will happen to Andy O'Day?" he said again, thoughtfully. "It's such a compelling question, a very lovely question, and I can tell you the answer. Because, you see, I've come through my time machine to warn you! I have a special message for you from the future. Do you want to know what it is?"

"No," I said at last, my voice thick and uncertain.

"Oh, Andy," he said, as if very disappointed. "Andy, Andy. Look! Here I am!" He held his arms out wide, as if I'd run toward them. "Your Dreadful Double!" I watched as he straightened himself, correcting the slow tilt of his body. "I know you," Mr. Mickleson said. His head drooped, but he kept one eye on me. "You must be coming to me--for *something*?"

I shook my head. I didn't know. I couldn't even begin to imagine, and yet I felt--not for the last time--that I was standing in a desolate and empty prairie, the fields unraveling away from me in all directions. The long winds ran through my hair.

"Don't you want to know a secret?" he said. "Come over here, I'll whisper in your ear."

And it seemed to me, then, that he did know a secret. It seemed to me that he would tell me something terrible, something I didn't want to hear. I watched as he closed my notebook and placed it neatly on the coffee table, next to the TV Guide. He balanced himself on two feet, lifting up and lurching toward me. "Hold still," he murmured. "I'll whisper."

I turned and ran.

I once tried to explain this incident to my wife, but it didn't make much sense to her. She nodded, as if it were merely strange, merely puzzling. Hmmm, she said, and I thought that perhaps it *was* odd to remember this time so vividly, when I remembered so little else. It *was* a little ridiculous that I should find Mr. Mickleson on my mind so frequently.

"He was just a drunk," my wife said. "A little crazy, maybe, but..." And she looked into my face, her mouth pursing. "He didn't...*do* anything to you, did he?" she said, awkwardly, and I shook my head.

"No--no," I said. And I explained to her that I never saw Mr. Mickleson again. I avoided the house after that night, of course, and when school started he wasn't teaching Science 7. We were told, casually, that he had an "emergency," that he had been called away, and when, after a few weeks, he still didn't return he was replaced without comment by an elderly lady substitute, who read to us from the textbook--*The World of Living Things*-- in a lilting, storybook voice, and who whispered "My God," as she watched us, later, dissecting earthworms, pinning them to corkboard and exposing their many hearts. We never found out where Mr. Mickleson had gone.

"He was probably in rehab," my wife said sensibly. "Or institutionalized. Your father was right. He was just a weirdo. It doesn't seem that mysterious to me."

Yes. I nodded a little, ready to drop the subject. I couldn't very well explain the empty longing I felt, the eager dread that would wash over me, going into the classroom and thinking that he might be sitting there behind the desk, waiting. It didn't make sense, I thought, and I couldn't explain it, any more than I could explain why he remained in my mind as I crisscrossed the country with my family, any more than I could explain why he seemed to be there when I thought of them, even now: Mark, fat and paranoid, on his houseboat; my mother in Mexico,

nodding over a cocktail; Debbie, staring at a spider in the corner of her room in the group home, her eyes dull; my father, frightened, calling me on the phone as his liver failed him, his body decomposing in a tiny grave in Idaho which I'd never visited. How could I explain that Mickleson seemed to preside over these thoughts, hovering at the edge of them like a stage director at the back of my mind, smiling as if he'd done me a favor?

I didn't know why he came into my mind as I thought of them, just as I didn't know why he seemed to appear whenever I told lies. It was just that I could sense him. *Yes*, he whispered as I told my college friends that my father was an archeologist living in Peru, that my mother was a former actress; *Yes*, he murmured as I lied to my father about Katrina; *Yes*, as I make excuses to my wife, when I say I am having dinner with a client when in fact I am tracing another path entirely--following a young family as they stroll through the park, or a whistling old man who might be my father, if he'd gotten away, or a small, brisk-paced woman, who looks like Katrina might, if Katrina weren't made up. How can I explain that I walk behind this Katrina woman for many blocks, living a different life, whistling my old man tune?

I can't. I can't explain it, no more than I can admit that I still have Mickleson's plaque, just as he probably still has my notebook; no more than I can explain why I take the plaque out of the bottom drawer of my desk, and unwrap the tissue paper I've folded it in, reading the inscription over, like a secret message: "I wear the chains I forged in life." I know it's just a cheap Dickens allusion, but it still seems important.

I can hear him say, "Hold still. I'll *whisper*."

Hmmm, my wife would say, puzzled and perhaps a bit disturbed. She's a practical

woman, and so I say nothing. It's probably best that she doesn't think any more about it, and I keep to myself the private warmth I feel when I sense a blackout coming, the darkness clasping its hands over my eyes. It's better this way--we're all happy. I'm glad that my wife will be there when I wake, and my normal life, and my beautiful daughters, looking at me, wide-eyed, staring.

“Hello?” my wife will say, and I'll smile as she nudges me. “Are you there?” she'll whisper.