

WHERE WE LIVE AND DIE

Stories about Writing

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Writing About Writing: An Introduction](#)

[The Girl on the Glider](#)

[Musings](#)

[Golden Boy](#)

[The Eleventh Muse](#)

[The House of Ushers](#)

[The Revolution Happened While You Were Sleeping \(A Summoning Spell\) – Remixed](#)

[Things They Don't Teach You In Writing Class](#)

[Notes About Writing About Writing](#)

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This one is for John Skipp and Alan M. Clark...

WHERE WE LIVE AND DIE

Stories about Writing

“All houses wherein men have lived and died
Are haunted houses
—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Haunted Houses*”

WRITING ABOUT
WRITING:
AN INTRODUCTION

The number one bit of advice given to all would-be writers is to “write what you know.” This line of wisdom can be interpreted in many different ways. Maybe you recently suffered a terrible heartbreak—the end of a romantic relationship or the loss of a loved one. The emotions stemming from something so painful can be mined for fiction, i.e. writing what you know. The flip side is also true. Maybe you just fell in love or held a sleeping baby. The joy those situations bring can also be used in fiction. Writing what you know can also involve your circumstances, situation, or station in life. When I first started writing with professional publication in mind, most of my characters were blue-collar young males stuck in dead end factory jobs in dead end towns. That’s because I was writing what I knew. I was a blue-collar young male stuck in a series of dead end factory jobs in a dead end town.

This is why, eventually, every writer of literary or popular fiction inevitably ends up writing about writing at some point in their career. It doesn’t matter what genre, or what style. Horror, bizarre romance, mystery, thriller, science-fiction, graphic novels...even those seemingly plotless bestselling literary darlings that eschew genre classification and used to get cooed about on Oprah. Read enough of them, and you’ll encounter a story about a writer.

That’s because the writers are writing about what they know. They’re writing about writing, and what it is to be a writer.

I’ve done the same thing a few times in my career. In the novels *Dark Hollow* and *The Complex*, the novella *Sundancing*, and in the stories collected in this book. And because my muse tends to lean toward things horrific and bizarre, it should come as no surprise that the elements of writing for living I’ve chronicled over the years are equally horrific and bizarre. All of these stories are about writing, and all of them fall under either the horror or bizarro genre labels. Two of them—“The Girl on the Glider” and “Musings”—are meta-fiction, in which I, the writer, become a character in the tale—which is just an even deeper level of writing what you know.

This collection’s origins were sort of a happy accident. Cameron Pierce of Lazy Fascist approached me about reprinting “The Girl on the Glider” in paperback. I was hesitant about that idea for a couple reasons. First of all, it had been published in hardcover, and was also available in a paperback short story collection as well as in various digital platforms (Kindle, Nook, Kobo, etc.). I felt it would be unfair to readers to release it as a stand-alone paperback when they could already get it elsewhere. Secondly, while the story’s length is fine for a collectible hardcover, it would have made for a slim paperback volume. So, I emailed Cameron back and politely declined. But Cameron, persistent as a two-fisted editor that he is, then threw a Henry Wadsworth Longfellow quote at me (the same quote that is used as this book’s epigraph) and asked, “What if we collected all of your stories about writing instead?”

And so we did.

Enjoy!

Brian Keene

THE GIRL ON
THE GLIDER

“Very nearly all the ghost stories of old times claim to be true narratives of remarkable occurrences

—M. R. James, *Some Remarks on Ghost Stories*

“Everything dies, but not everything has an ending

—Brian Keene, *City of the Dead*

“Chugga chugga, choo choo, spin around. Every letter has a sound.

—Children’s Toy

ENTRY 1:

I dreamed about her again last night—the girl on the glider. Apparently, I was kicking and thrashing so hard in my sleep that I woke up my wife. She wasn’t very happy about it, either. The baby has been getting up between 4am and 5am every morning, and Cassi didn’t appreciate me waking her a few hours before that.

This morning, while we were giving the baby his breakfast, Cassi asked me if I remembered what I was dreaming about. I lied and told her that I didn’t.

Anyway, it’s clear that this shit isn’t going away on its own. If anything, it’s getting worse. I’m not one-hundred percent positive that I know who the girl is, or why she’s hanging out on our porch glider, or why I’m dreaming about her, but I have some ideas. The only problem is that my ideas all point to one solution. One answer.

And the answer is that I’m losing my fucking mind.

That scares me. That scares me in ways I can’t even put into words (which is frustrating for a writer). I mean, at forty-one—or am I forty-two? I can’t remember. Isn’t it funny how you stop keeping track of that shit after a certain age? Let’s see. Dad came back from Vietnam in 1967 and I came along nine months later, so that makes me...forty-one. I think. Math was never my strong suit. Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that I’m forty-one, which sucks, but doesn’t suck nearly as bad as being forty-two.

But I digress, new diary. As I was saying, at forty-one, I’ve thought about my own mortality a little bit. I don’t like to, but I really don’t have any choice, do I? After my Dad’s cancer battle and the fact that I’m a father again—it makes a guy think long and hard about things. I’ve led a pretty hardcore lifestyle. That shit takes a toll on you after a while. Sooner or later, it catches up with you.

In truth, I always figured it would be my past that killed me—the booze or the tobacco or the era of loose sex all seemed to be likely candidates. Or maybe a slick road combined with a high rate of speed and some heavy metal blasting from the speakers. Or maybe I’d go out like Dick Laymon and my Grandma Lena did—a quick and sudden heart attack. Or maybe I’d get gunned down at a book signing

by some crazed fan. “Here ya go, zombie guy! Let’s see you come back from the dead!”

Click click, bang. Curtains close, and...scene. Type ‘The End.’

None of those would be pleasant. Especially cancer. I’m scared to fucking death of cancer. I can think of anything more horrifying than dying of cancer. I’d rather drown or burn to death than die of cancer. But losing my mind terrifies me even more than cancer does, because if I lost my mind, I wouldn’t be able to write anymore. Losing my voice wouldn’t impact my writing. Neither would losing my legs or my sight or my hearing. Even if I lost my hands, I’d still be able to write. There’s voice recognition software and other methods I could use. The only part of my body I couldn’t write without is my brain, and apparently, my brain has decided to declare war on me.

That’s why I’ve started writing this manuscript. Diary. Whatever the fuck it is. I’m writing it to help me work out this shit on my own. I mean, let’s be realistic. It’s not like I can Blog about it. They make fun of Whitley Strieber for saying he was abducted by grey aliens possessed with a disturbing fascination for his bunghole. Imagine what they’d do to me if I said in public that I was being haunted by a teenaged girl who likes to hang out on my porch and send text messages on her cell phone and talk to my nineteen-month-old son and occasionally scare the shit out of my dog—even if she’s not probing my ass the way Whitley’s aliens do.

I can’t talk about it online, and I can’t tell my friends about it, either. It’s hard times right now, especially for writers. Tough financial straits. You’d think that people would buy more books during recession, but apparently, it’s quite the opposite. J. F. (Jesus) Gonzalez and Tim Lebbon and Tom Piccirilli and Jim Moore and everybody else I know are in the same financial situation that I’m in, and I don’t foresee the President or Congress giving us a corporate bailout anytime soon. My peers have problems of their own. They’ve got enough on their minds. They don’t need one of their best writers or friends confiding in them that he might very well be going crazy. And if I told my inner circle—John Urbancik, Geoff “Coop” Cooper, Mike Oliveri and Michael “Mikey” Huyck—I’m pretty sure they would try to set up some kind of intervention for me, and who needs that shit, right? I’m still pissed about the last time they tried to do that to me.

I could tell Cassi, I guess. I mean, she’s my wife. I’m supposed to tell her everything, but for some reason, I haven’t told her about this. To be honest, I think she already suspects. She’s commented a few times over the last couple of weeks that I seem out of it. And she’s right. I am a bit out of it. But I can’t tell her everything yet, because I don’t want to scare her. If I start crying or something—if I break down—it will really frighten her, and right now, with everything else that’s going on, I have to be the strong one. For her. The baby. Our friends and families. All of us.

So I’m telling you.

Dear new manuscript that I’m typing on my laptop:

My name is Brian Keene and I am either losing my mind or I am being haunted.

Or both.

That’s a start. Feels good to type it, though. This can be like my own little private blog. I’ll break the entries up into chapters. Maybe include a few footnotes. It will feel just like any other manuscript. Maybe then I can get at the truth. We’ll call it meta-fiction or gonzo—the blending of fact and fiction, the inserting of the author into the narrative. If it’s good enough for Hunter S. Thompson and Tim Powers and Stephen King (who inserted himself as a character into the *Dark Tower* series) then I reckon it’s good enough for me, too.

More tomorrow. Got up at 5:30am this morning. It’s now 11:07pm and I’m frigging exhausted. Been working on that novella for Cemetery Dance all day (the weird western novella that I still don’t have a working title for—I’m considering calling it *An Occurrence in Crazy Bear Valley*). John Lansdale, who is the man I’d most like to be when I grow up, once told me that he writes two to four hours a day. That’s what I aspire to. That’s what I hope I’m doing when I’m his age. But I’m not. An

to pay the bills, I put in long hours at the keyboard every fucking day, writing about zombies and ghouls and satyrs and giant carnivorous worms. Anyway, my point is that I'm tired (you can tell because I have a tendency to ramble when I'm tired). I'm gonna finish this cigar, have a glass of Bas Hayden's while I walk the dog, and then I'm going to bed.

Hopefully, I won't dream about her tonight.

ENTRY 2:

No dreams last night, at least, none that I remember. Cassi didn't mention that I'd woke her up by having nightmares either. There was one weird thing last night, though. I'd gone to bed after typing that first entry, and I was just starting to drift off—in that weird state where I wasn't quite asleep but not quite fully awake either—and then I heard an electronic beeping noise, like somebody was typing a text message on a cell phone. It was coming from the bathroom that's adjacent to our bedroom. Do you know what's on the other side of that bathroom wall?

The outside of our house. Specifically, our deck and the porch glider.

I'd like to think it was my imagination. I'd like to chalk it up to the fact that I've been thinking about all the weird shit too much, and now I'm starting to conjure up strangeness myself when nothing else is happening.

Except that this wasn't the first time I've heard it.

Okay, back to work. Finished this week's free internet serial installment of *Earthworm Gods I Deluge* but need to spend the rest of the night working on this frigging Bigfoot novella. Damn thing kicking my ass, which pisses me off, because otherwise, it's been a lot of fun to write.

ENTRY 3:

It's been a while since I worked on this. Ended up buried in deadlines—finishing the Bigfoot story and working on *A Gathering of Crows*, a Superman Halloween story script for DC comics, and a bunch of other stuff. Some of it will bring us money, which is good because we could really use it right now. The economy has gotten worse and the apocalypse is now upon us, at least as far as the small press goes. Once-reliable publishers are now either late with the royalty payments or simply ducking my calls and emails (and the calls and emails from others whom they owe). Thank God or Cthulhu that my mass-market checks are still arriving on time and that I've got comic book work and my temporary gig as an adjunct professor at York College to round out my income, because I suspect the days of the mid-list, working writer are coming to a close. We are a dying breed.

Dying. Death. Christ, I'm a cheery little fucker, huh? That's me. I'm Mr. Sunshine. I'm all about shiny happy people holding fucking hands and singing "Kumbaya."

It's not lost on me that I seem preoccupied with death and dying lately. I don't know why. Like I said earlier, maybe it's because of all the recent health scares in my family. But we've had health scares before and they didn't impact me this way. I don't know. I have to wonder if this is some sort of mid-life crisis type of mind-fuck. Certainly, I'm no stranger to death. I've known people who die. One set of grandparents, my great-uncle Hobie, several extended family members, Navy buddies, friends from high school, homeys from my days living on the streets, co-workers, Dick Laymon.

The three babies Cassi and I lost...

But I wrote about the babies already. I've been known to tell reporters that "writing is cheaper than therapy" and I always grin when I say it, to show that I'm just joking around, but the fact is I'm not fucking joking. Let me tell you something. There are many reasons why I identify with the fictional character of Tony Soprano—enough that I could write an entire book about it. One of the reasons is v

have similar views on therapy. I've been to therapy, and therapy is bullshit. Yes, it works for other people, and I'm not belittling its overall value—but I'm telling you that it doesn't work for me. What works for me is to write about what's on my mind. Write about the shit going on in my life. *Dark Hollow* was me writing about me and Cassi's loss. Readers don't know that, but I do. Readers think it was just a fun little book about a satyr in suburbia, but I know that chapter two was the closest fucking thing to an autobiography I've ever written. Hell, the whole book was autobiographical. Adam Senft and Brian Keene. His doubts about his manhood and feelings of inadequacy because of his inability to save his loved ones was something I was intimately familiar with at the time. It was a hard novel to write. No, wait. Scratch that. It was an emotionally harrowing and utterly brutalizing novel to write. I went to a very dark place for that book, and I didn't come out again until I'd dredged up everything and vomited it out onto the page and bared my soul and almost killed myself in the process. Writing books like that one—pouring your personal shit into a novel or a short story—that's like confession and exorcism and six months of therapy all rolled into one. I don't need Prozac or Lithium. I have a laptop and a publishing contract.

Shit. Now I'm rambling again. My point is this: I'm no stranger to death. We're old friends, he and I. At the very least, we're acquaintances. We recognize each other at the party and perhaps we nod in passing. I've watched people die. I've held them in my arms and had my hands turn sticky from the blood and felt the warmth drain out of them.

So why is it bothering me now? Why, after all this time, am I dwelling on it?

Anyway, enough about that.

My son, who is nineteen months old, looks at the top of our driveway and waves to somebody who isn't there. He always greets them with "Hi." Then he smiles. Occasionally, he giggles—the same little laugh he does when Cassi and I make faces at him. When I turn to look at who he's talking to, the driveway is empty.

I am not crazy.

ENTRY 4:

I guess I should start at the beginning. That's the only way I'll make any sense of this. I went back and re-read the previous entries again tonight, after I was finished looking for a short story I could let Stephen Jones reprint for an anthology he's putting together, and what I've written so far is nothing more than the incoherent, self-indulgent babblings of a madman. That won't do, especially since I'm trying to prove to myself that I'm not insane.

So...

In the beginning, I started making enough money as a writer that my wife and I were able to move out of our small home on Main Street in Shrewsbury, and buy a place out in the country instead. I like our home very much. It reminds me of the type of area I grew up in, and those kinds of places aren't very easy to find anymore. Everything is suburbs now—suburbs marking the distance between the next cluster of Home Depots and Walmarts and Burger Kings. Everything is sidewalks and homeowners' associations and McMansions and housing developments with names like Whispering Pines that don't have a single fucking pine tree, whispering or otherwise.

Our place isn't like that at all. It is distinctly old school. We have three acres of rural land. There are lots of tall, old-growth sycamore trees growing in our yard, and at the far end of our property there is a swift, cold trout stream about twelve feet across and knee-deep in most places. In the spring the creek often floods. We've got a neighbor on one side of our property. We share a driveway with him (the driveway is important and we'll come back to it in a minute). The other side of our property borders a vast marsh. Beyond the swamp is four miles of state-owned game land—a lush, thick

wilderness that, by law, can never be developed or forested. Beyond these woods lies the Susquehanna River, which our trout stream also feeds into. There's an old logging road that runs from the edge of our property and through the woods, all the way to the river. Once, when Tim Lebbon was visiting, he took him for a walk back through there. He proclaimed it one of the most beautiful places on earth.

And it is.

A brief aside. I just cheated. It's late and I want to shut this laptop off and go to sleep, so I took a shortcut. I copied and pasted the description of the house from my novella *Scratch* into this document and then changed the tense and a few other things. That's because the house in *Scratch* is this house and their landscapes are the same. Both are beautiful, and I love this place as much as the character Evan in *Scratch* loved his. That's why it concerns me that Cassi has recently floated the idea of buying a house somewhere else. I'm not sure what has prompted this desire. It makes no sense, certainly not in this economy. I have to wonder if she's seeing some of the same things I've been seeing. I know that in at least one case, she has, but I wonder if there's more. Perhaps she's keeping secrets from me just as I'm keeping them from her. Maybe she's seen and heard more than she's letting on. Maybe I'm not crazy. Or maybe she's just as crazy as I am.

Anyway...the driveway. The driveway is an important part of this story, so let's talk about that. As I said before, it's a shared driveway, meaning me and Cassi and our neighbor and his wife all use it. It's all uphill, and a real bitch to shovel in the winter. It empties out onto a winding, two-lane back road that is frequented all day and night by speeding dump trucks, speeding tractor trailers, speeding teenagers, and speeding commuters trying to find a shortcut on their way to their jobs in Baltimore, Lancaster, Harrisburg and York. The posted speed limit is forty-five miles per hour, but I've never seen anybody go slower than sixty-five. Since we're right on the township line, we're not an ideal area for speed traps. By the time a cop on our side of the line pulled out in pursuit of a speeding car, the violator would already be in the next township.

We've lived here five years, and in that time there have been over twenty serious accidents (that I know of) within two miles of our driveway, plus countless fender-benders and other vehicular mishaps. Indeed, our first winter at the house, an ice storm turned York County's roads into Slip 'n Slide and our road was wall-to-wall fender-benders that morning. Automobiles were smashing into each other like bumper cars and lining up in front of our house. I stood out there and directed traffic and brought folks coffee until the fire department arrived.

I know of four fatalities that have occurred in the time we've lived here. I personally witnessed one of them. A couple on a motorcycle rear-ended a pick-up truck that was making a left turn. Both riders were ejected from the bike. The woman's head cracked like an egg inside her helmet. There wasn't much the truck driver, my neighbor, or myself could do for her. She was dead before the paramedics arrived. I never found out what happened to the guy that was on the bike with her, but I remember that his chest looked like raw hamburger.

One of the other fatalities happened about a mile from our house. A machine operator from the Harley Davidson plant was coming home after second shift and hit a tree. The tree won. Speculation is that the driver fell asleep at the wheel. The third fatal accident happened fifty yards from our driveway. A lone driver ran down an embankment at three in the morning. The accident was quiet enough that both my neighbors and my wife and I slept through it. We didn't know anything was amiss until we heard the sirens outside. By then it was too late, although, judging by the condition of the car and the body, it would have been too late long before they arrived.

The fourth fatality occurred at the top of our driveway.

And that was how I met the girl on the glider. And that is where our story really begins.

ENTRY 5:

I wasn't home when it happened. It was mid-January, and I was a Guest of Honor at a convention in Missouri called VisionCon. After Saturday's book signing and Q&A were over with, I spent the evening hanging out in the hotel bar with Mike Oliveri, Cullen Bunn, Val Botchlet (who used to moderate my old message board forum), my friend Richard Christy's cousin Adam, playwright Roy C. Booth, and the guys from Skullvines Press. I was pleased to note that the hotel bar, upon learning that I would be back in town that weekend, had Basil Hayden's and Knob Creek on hand (the year before they'd only had Jack Daniel's and Jim Beam available, which are like the Coors and Budweiser of bourbon). Needless to say, we had a good time, and I didn't get to bed until after 3am.

When I woke up the next morning, I called home to talk to Cassi. She sounded tired and I soon found out why. She hadn't gotten much sleep the night before. She told me there had been another accident. Four kids, all of them between the ages of eighteen and twenty, had wrecked their car right at the top of our driveway. Three walked away from the accident. One did not. The accident happened just after midnight. Emergency vehicles, firemen and paramedics had been on hand until well after dawn. Had Cassi experienced some kind of crisis, and had to leave our home, she would have been unable to get out of our driveway. The emergency crews had it blocked off, along with the road. I asked her if she knew the details and found out that she didn't. All she knew was what one of the paramedics had told her—the wreck, the number and ages of the people in the car, and that one of them had died. I asked her if Coop had been on the scene, since he works as an EMT and our road runs along his ambulance route. It turned out he hadn't. While all of this was going on, Coop and the rest of his ambulance crew had been down at the river, fishing a suicide out of the half-frozen water near the Columbia-Marietta Bridge.

My flight home from Missouri was delayed until Monday night due to inclement weather. I didn't land in Baltimore until nearly midnight and didn't get home until after 2am Tuesday morning. I didn't bother to look for damage from the accident or markings on the road. It was dark and foggy outside and I was focused solely on giving my wife, my son and my dog all a big hug. I didn't see anything that night, supernatural or otherwise.

I wonder now, looking back, if I might have seen something then had I been looking for it—and if I had seen something, would I have known what it was?

The next morning, after I woke up and unpacked and told my wife about my trip, I remembered the accident and decided to walk up to the top of the driveway and survey the damage. Yes, I'm one of those people who slow down to gawk at accidents on the highway. I'll stand and watch a burning building. I'm fascinated by such things. To be fair, though, I'd like to think that I'm also the type of person who will stop along that highway and offer assistance, or run inside that burning building and pull people out until the firemen arrive. This is what I tell myself, at least.

I walked up the driveway and was out of breath by the time I reached the top. This happens a lot more and more these last few years. When I was a kid, I could ride my BMX Mongoose all over York County, pedaling down to Spring Grove to buy comic books at the newsstand, and not get winded. In the Navy, I could swim a mile and not be out of breath. I used to run cross country in high school (the only organized sport I ever played, and I did it just to make my old man happy). But now, at forty-one? Forget about it. I gasp for breath after walking a mile through the woods and vigorous sex sometimes leaves me winded and on the verge of passing out. There are times when I lay there on the bed, wheezing and panting and waiting for the room to stop spinning. I told Cassi she should consider my breathlessness a compliment, but she doesn't see it that way. It concerned Cassi enough that she made me go to the doctor. I hate doctors. I could cut my arm off in a horrific threshing machine accident and I still wouldn't go to the doctor. But I went for her. The doctor said there wasn't anything wrong with me. No heart trouble (at least, not yet). No lung trouble. In plain terms, I was out

fucking shape. I asked him how this could be. He asked me what I did for a living. I told him I s around in my underwear and made up scary stories all day long. He frowned, as if to say, “Well there’s your answer.”

I was never the athletic type. Sure, I can hold my own in a fight (and I am mean enough to win), but I’m not much for playing sports or exercising or things like that. Under orders to get in shape, I went to the one person whose advice I trust in such a situation—Wrath James White, former World Champion kickboxer, UFC trainer and fighter, horror novelist, and one of my best friends. He told me to run every day. He said I should start out running, and when I felt like I couldn’t go on, that instead of stopping, I should walk. Then, after a little bit of walking, I should start running again. Wrath told me to do this every day, and I’d be in shape in no time. I did it once and it almost killed me.

I’m certain this was Wrath’s idea of a practical joke.

Anyway, I stood at the top of the driveway and looked around while I caught my breath. It was easy to tell what had happened. The car had been coming north and heading southwest when, for whatever reason, the driver lost control. It had swerved up the embankment on the far side of the road, missing our mailbox by inches. Then it had flipped over onto its roof, slid back across the road, and slammed into the guardrail next to our driveway. There was debris and markings everywhere. The tires had gouged huge trenches in the embankment, and a piece of the muffler had come off on a chunk of granite sticking up out of the dirt. The pavement was scratched and scuffed, and covered with fragments of windshield glass and shards of plastic from the headlights, taillights and elsewhere. There were a bunch of other tiny parts. I don’t know shit about cars, but I bet Coop could have identified them easily enough (Coop once took it upon himself to teach me how to fix a car. Within an hour, he’d grown annoyed enough to tell me that the timing belt ran the digital clock on my dashboard. I believed him. It was my wife who eventually set me straight).

Some of the junk was lying in our driveway. I’d probably driven right over it the night before. I wondered why the cops hadn’t done a better job of cleaning up after the accident. Maybe it was because there were just so many crashes on this road, and they knew they’d have to do it all over again soon enough. There was more debris scattered around the crumpled guardrail, along with bent and broken saplings and vegetation.

There were black and brown stains on the road. The heaviest concentration of them seemed to be about ten feet away from the guardrail. The black stuff was oil. The brown stains were blood. Around these, the State Police investigators had spray-painted arrows, circles and numbers. Number one corresponded with the embankment. Number four corresponded with the largest of the bloodstains. These modern day hieroglyphics told me a story. Someone had been ejected from the car when it flipped over onto its roof. That person was thrown further down the road while the car and the other three occupants slid toward the guardrail. I wondered who came to a stop first. I was pretty sure, judging by the visual evidence, that the person who’d been ejected was the one who had died.

I walked back down to the house, went out into the garage, and got a broom and a snow shovel. Then I trekked back up to the top of the hill and swept the debris out of our driveway. When I was finished, I went out to my office and settled in to do some work. Nothing relaxes me more than sitting in my office after I’ve been out on the road, and this was my first chance to enjoy it since coming home from VisionCon. I started writing, and didn’t think about the accident again until the next day, when the cross showed up.

ENTRY 6:

The only newspaper I read is *USA Today*, and the only time I read it is when I’m traveling. I’ve tried twice to subscribe to it, but each time I was told that we lived too far out in the country for them

deliver it. We don't subscribe to either of the local papers. It's nothing personal. I have good friends both the *York Daily Record* and the *York Dispatch*. Indeed, before I went full-time as a novelist, I used to supplement my income as a freelance writer for the *York Dispatch*/*York Sunday News*. Both papers have given me reasonably fair coverage over the years (other than the time they mistakenly reported that I was quitting horror to write a Civil War novel). I have nothing against either publication, but I don't subscribe to either. I read the news online when I wake up in the morning. By the time the local paper would arrive, I'd already be working, so it doesn't make sense for me to subscribe.

Both papers had, in fact, reported on the accident, but I missed the coverage.

I also don't watch the local news. Unlike the local newspapers, our two local television stations—WGAL 8 and WPMT Fox 43—are both run by monkeys. At least, that's the way it seems to me. Channel 8 spends fifty-five minutes of every news hour extolling the benefits of their Super Doppler Weather Radar. The remaining five minutes are usually devoted to a special feature regarding whichever advertiser paid them the most money that week. I'm not kidding about this. Fox 43 isn't much better. To their credit, they do attempt to report the news, but their idea of reporting involves sending pretty female news anchors out to the local dairy farm or Cub Scout meeting for some 'slice of life' events. If Iran does eventually build a nuclear bomb, you won't hear about it on either station because Channel 8 will have local weatherman Doug Allen jerking off over the goddamn Super Doppler Radar and Fox 43 will be reporting live from some craft fair in fucking Hanover.

I don't know if either of them reported on the accident. I somehow doubt it, but if they did, I missed the report.

And don't even get me started on the sorry state of our local radio stations...

In truth, even though it was only twenty-four hours since I'd swept up the debris, I'd already forgotten all about the crash. After all, it had happened while I was gone, and none of the victims were anyone that I knew, and our property hadn't been damaged, and the wreckage was gone, so it didn't really impact me that much. It was something that happened, a momentary distraction, but there were other things to focus on, important things like writing and trying to figure out if it was possible to add yet another novel to my list of deadlines in order to pay for the baby's daycare.

Perhaps that sounds callous. Someone had lost their life. Perhaps I should have been a little more concerned. Caring. Sympathetic. But I wasn't. I don't think that makes me a bad person. I think it just makes me what I am—a flawed human, just like everybody else.

Around noon, I walked up to the top of the driveway to get the mail. I noticed a rustic, white picket cross and a beautiful floral arrangement mounted on the smashed guardrail. I've driven by the crosses countless times. You see them dotting our roads and interstates. Sometimes, they seem almost as abundant as McDonald's, Exxon and other highway staples. I'd never actually seen one up close though. Up until that moment, I'd only experienced them as a passing glance through the windshield there but for the blink of an eye and then gone as the next mile marker rolled past.

Curious, I quickly pulled the mail out of our mailbox and then hurried over to the cross for a closer look. The flowers were fresh and professionally arranged. There was no tag or any indication of which local florist had put them together. Nor was there a name on the cross. Not even the old standard 'R.I.P.' It was just plain white—two thin slats nailed together in the middle.

I turned away and started back downhill. The mailman had brought no royalty or advance checks. Instead, there were only bills, catalogs and my monthly issues of *National Geographic*, *Soldier Fortune* and *The Fortean Times* (all of which, for some inexplicable reason, seem to arrive on the same day each month). I was flipping through the bills, wondering how the hell we were going to stay caught up on them, when the wind began to blow. I heard a rustling sound behind me.

Figuring it was my cat, Max (who lives outdoors and was the source of inspiration for Hannibal from my short story, "Halves"), I turned around and then stopped.

Ever see the wind pick up a bunch of leaves and spin them in a mini-cyclone? It's common, of course. That's what was happening. The leaves around the cross were spinning fast, reaching a height of about five and a half feet off the ground. Then, as quickly as it had started, the breeze died off and the leaves floated back down to the ground.

That was the first thing that happened. I didn't think much about it at the time, and even now, I'm almost willing to chalk it up to nothing more than a natural occurrence—except for everything that happened since then.

In hindsight, there was nothing about it that was natural...

ENTRY 7:

The second thing that happened is also somewhat dubious, but when considered in the greater context it makes me wonder, especially given her recent expressed desire to move.

Cassi is a smoker. Ever since the baby came along, she only smokes outside, and then, only after he's gone to bed. There's an ashtray out on the deck, along with a table, four chairs and the glider. Of course, yes, we can't forget about the porch glider. It's the central part of our story.

The glider is a family heirloom. It belonged to Cassi's grandmother and was given to us after she passed away. Cassi has fond memories of sitting on it when she was a little girl. It's very comfortable, but the cushions are a garish, green floral print and when it rains, they soak up the moisture. Sit on them after a storm and your ass will get wet.

Within two days of the accident, Cassi stopped smoking out on the deck. Instead, she began smoking in our bathroom with the door closed and the exhaust fan running full blast. At first, I didn't think anything of it. Keep in mind, it was winter. I just assumed that it was too cold outside to smoke. But as months passed and the nights grew warmer, she still avoided smoking out on the deck. When I asked her why, she said she got spooked out there at night. Neither our flashlight nor the big dusk-to-dawn light that's installed on the side of the garage helped. She said it was still too dark out there, and sometimes, she felt like someone was watching her. Despite those lights, the top of our driveway remains pitch black at night. If you shine the flashlight up the hill, the beam gets lost in the darkness almost as if the shadows are swallowing it. The only thing that dispels the darkness are the headlights of approaching cars, and then, only for an instant.

I asked her when she'd started feeling this way, and she said it was after the accident.

My wife is not given to flights of fancy. She's firmly grounded in reality. She's the Agent Scully to my Agent Mulder, to put it in terms of *The X-Files*. The only spiritual or supernatural activity she even remotely engages in is occasionally attending Catholic or Episcopalian church services. She doesn't believe in aliens or Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster or ghosts. Despite this, being out on the deck and staring up at the driveway at night has made her uncomfortable enough to start smoking inside. As I write this, many months later, that is still her practice. Let's call that occurrence number two, and catalog it accordingly.

ENTRY 8:

If this were a horror novel, I'd plot it like one, but it's not a horror novel. It's simply a diary, notating a random collection of occurrences, all of which have happened since the accident. I'm jumping around here. One minute, I'm in the present. The next, I'm back to the beginning again. There is no linear narrative. There is no slow build of suspense and dread. There is only me, trying to make sense of it all.

I can't remember who said it, but there's a great quote regarding *The Amityville Horror*, *Poltergeist*

and similar haunted house stories. The quote (and I'm paraphrasing here) goes something like this: 'this stuff really happened, if the house was really haunted, then why did the people stay? Why didn't they move the fuck out as soon as they heard the voices/saw the ghost/the dog started levitating? Because that's what would happen in real life.'

Except that's not true. I know, because this is real life. This is real fucking life and we can't move. We can't move because we can't afford to move. We can't afford to buy another house. Cassi's been talking about it again—talking about finding a place with sidewalks and fenced-in backyards where the baby can play. A year ago, she was fine with him growing up playing in our big backyard with its trees and trout stream and wild outdoors. Now she's craving suburbia, and I think I know why. I don't think it has anything to do with sidewalks. It has to do with some of the things that have happened here.

That should make me happy, because if it's true, then it means that I'm not crazy. If she's experiencing things too—enough that she suddenly wants to move—then that's proof right there that I'm not losing my mind. Right? If so, then I should be ecstatic. But I'm not. I'm not because this is my family we're talking about, and we probably should move and I can't afford to do it. I'm supposed to take care of them and provide for them and protect them, and in this case, the best way to do those things is to buy another house and get the hell away from here.

I wish sometimes that I still had a real job, a job where I operated a machine or moved boxes around, and got a paycheck every week for my efforts. A job with health insurance and a 401K would be nice, too. It would be awesome to have a job where people didn't email me at the end of the day after I busted my ass for eight hours, and say, "Your last book sucked. When are you gonna write another zombie novel?" But I'd even put up with that, as long as the job gave me a steady enough income that I could buy us a new home.

Earlier this week, I tried to get a job like that. I went back to two of my former employers—the foundry and the loading docks. Neither one of them were hiring, on account of the economy. The Human Resources Director at the foundry said, "You must be a millionaire from all those books. What would you want to come back to work here?"

Life is nothing more than a series of lyrics from Bruce Springsteen songs.

This is good whiskey. Woodford Reserve. Big fucking bottle. I believe I will have some more. I believe, in fact, that I will drink this bottle dry tonight.

The people in those stories don't move out because they can't. They're trapped.

So am I.

ENTRY 9:

The third bit of strangeness occurred around the end of March. In truth, I'd again forgotten all about the accident. Oh, sure, I thought of it for a second when I went up to get the mail or pulled in or out of my driveway. The cross was kind of hard to miss. The floral arrangements had since withered and died, but the marker was still there. So while I did occasionally think of the accident, such thoughts were fleeting. They weren't even fully-formed thoughts. If anything, they were just echoes.

I'd even forgotten about the mini-cyclone the leaves had formed. Cassi had taken to smoking inside but as I said earlier, I hadn't put two and two together at that point, and didn't know why she changed her routine. I thought it was because of the cold weather.

The third occurrence was an incredibly vivid and detailed dream. I know that I dream all night. I've been told by Cassi, ex-girlfriends, my ex-wife, one-night stands, cellmates, my old Navy buddies and anyone else who has ever slept beside me that I'm restless at night. I kick and twitch and talk in my sleep. Not mumbling. Not whispering. No, I have loud, boisterous and elaborate dream conversations.

Sadly, I never remember them. It's rare that I remember any of my dreams. But I remembered the one. It happened in March. Here we are, months later, and I still remember every detail.

In the dream, I was sitting out on our deck after dark, smoking a cigar and looking up at the stars twinkling down through the tree limbs. I do this quite a bit in the waking world, so the dream was pleasant enough. Max was sprawled in my lap, and I was petting him with one hand and holding my cigar in the other. My dog, Sam (who was the inspiration for Big Steve in my novel *Dark Hollow*, as well as many other things), was sprawled at my feet. There was a glass of bourbon on the table in front of me. Crickets and spring peepers were chirping over in the swamp, and in the distance, I could hear the soft, muted roar of the trout stream. Eventually, I became aware that Max and I weren't alone. I heard the glider rails squeak, as if someone was slowly rocking back and forth. I turned around and there was a girl sitting on the glider. As soon as I saw her, Max jumped down off my lap and ran away, hissing.

The girl was young, maybe eighteen or nineteen years old. She had long, shoulder-length blonde hair, combed straight. She was thin but not skinny. Pretty. She wore denim jeans, sneakers and a white t-shirt. She clutched a black cell phone in one hand, and held it at her side, as if waiting for it to ring. When she raised her head and looked at me, her expression was one of profound sadness.

She said something, but I couldn't hear her. Her lips moved silently.

And then I woke up. I lay there for a while, thinking about the dream and wondering what it meant. Did I know the girl? She seemed vaguely familiar, but I didn't know why. I was left with a sense—certainty—that I *should* know her, and yet I didn't. Who was she? Could she have been a fan I'd met at a book signing, perhaps? Or maybe someone I'd encountered briefly at some point in my life, but I had since forgotten—an old coworker or one-night stand?

I didn't know, and the harder I thought about it, the more important it seemed.

Unable to sleep, I slipped out of bed, pissed, and then put on my robe. I went out to my office, made a pot of coffee and worked until five o'clock in the morning, at which point I came in and waited for the baby to wake up. When he did, I got him out of the crib, changed his diaper and made him breakfast. When Cassi finally woke up, she was grateful for the opportunity to sleep in. She asked me what time I'd gotten up, and I told her. Then I told her about the dream. She agreed that it was odd.

A new day began, but unlike the leaf cyclone or the accident itself, I didn't forget about the dream. I jotted it down in my commonplace book (a notebook that many authors use to write down story ideas, scraps of dialogue, plot devices, sketches, or anything else that occurs to them when they are away from their writing instruments) with the intent of cannibalizing it for a story at some point in the future. There was something about the dream. Something unsettling. I wanted to capture every detail I needed to make sure that I would remember her face.

What I didn't know at the time was that remembering her face wouldn't be a problem for me because I would see her again.

ENTRY 10:

About two weeks after that, I was sitting out on the deck with Sam and Max. It was early April, and it was quite a warm evening for the season. Much like in the dream, I was smoking a cigar, drinking bourbon and watching the stars. I even remember what brands the cigar and bourbon were—Partagas 1848 Black Label and Knob Creek with just a little bit of ice. Max was sprawled in my lap, all twenty pounds of him, purring and stretching and acting not at all like the badass outdoor tomcat he likes to portray himself as when others are around. Sam was lying at my feet, leash-free, but to keep him off the porch, I'd strategically placed two baby gates at each of the deck's exits. Had I not done this, Sam would have waited until I was distracted and then dashed off into the woods. He is a mutt—mostly

mix of Rottweiler and Beagle, the latter of which comes out in him whenever he catches a scent. ~~When I walk quite often through the woods and whenever he sniffs a rabbit or a fox or any other creature, he~~ strains at the leash hard enough to choke himself. On the few occasions where he's actually slipped his collar, he runs off without thought of consequence, totally focused and consumed on tracking his quarry. Usually, he ends up lost and exhausted to the point of collapse, and I have to hunt him down and carry him back home. The baby gates prevented that, and allowed me to enjoy my cigar and whiskey in peace. Cassi was inside, talking on the phone to J. F. "Jesus" Gonzalez's wife. The baby was asleep. All was right with the world.

I was sitting there smoking and thinking about literary estates. Jesus and I had both been wanting to create literary estates for our families. I was pretty sure that was what Cassi and her friend were discussing, as well, because in addition to the literary estates, we wanted to legally draft an agreement wherein if either Cassi and I or Jesus and his wife died unexpectedly, we would gain legal guardianship over the other's children. Cassi was of a mind that we didn't need to worry about things like that yet, but I wasn't so sure. Both of our parents are too old to care full-time for a child, and my oldest son, who was eighteen at the time, had his whole life ahead of him. It didn't seem right to burden him with the possibility of having to care for his younger half-brother, should something happen to us.

Creating a literary estate took money, something that neither Jesus nor I had much of. I'd gotten a sample draft from a link Neil Gaiman had posted, and was weighing the possibilities of finding something similar on LegalZoom.com or another website. I wondered if such a document would still be considered legal. This was important to me. I didn't want to die and have the rights to my work fall into the hands of one of my publishers. The money, what little there was, should go to my sons.

This was what I was thinking about when Sam started growling. I glanced down at him. He was staring at the top of the driveway. His ears were flattened and his haunches were raised. His tail was between his legs and he stood stiff as a board. When I reached for him, he growled again. His eyes never left the spot at the top of the hill.

I looked around, thinking he'd seen an animal, but the driveway was deserted. Annoyed, I picked up Max, sat him down and then took Sam inside. When I came back out, Max had run off to the garage and was standing outside the door, meowing to be let in. Although he is an outdoor cat, Max sleeps in the garage at night. It provides him safety from the cold in the winter and protection from nocturnal predators like coyotes and foxes and owls in the warmer months. I opened the door and let him in. Then I closed it behind me and returned to my cigar.

As I sat down again, the porch glider began to move. The rocking was slow, but noticeable. Back and forth. Back and forth. The aluminum struts squeaked. Max began howling inside the garage. In the house, I heard Sam start growling again. He barked once, loud and powerful. Then Cassi hollered at him to shut up. Her voice was muted, almost lost beneath the forcefulness of his bark. Through it all the glider kept rocking. There was no wind. I glanced up at the treetops to confirm this. No wind, not even a slight breeze. Sometimes, when a dump truck or tractor trailer goes barreling down the road they'll vibrate our deck, but the road was clear. There were no vibrations, no disturbance.

And yet the glider was moving.

I said, "What the fuck?"

The glider's rails squeaked in response as it continued rocking. Cigar clenched between my teeth, I walked over to it. It stopped moving when I was halfway across the deck.

If this was fiction, this would be the part of the story where the protagonist starts to put two and two together—the dream of the girl on the glider (so eerily similar in setting to what was now occurring in real life), the glider moving on its own while the protagonist watches. But this isn't fiction, and I didn't put those two events together. Not then.

That came after my son started saying “Hi” to something I couldn’t see.

ENTRY 11:

Been a few days since I worked on this. Real life intruded. To paraphrase Bob Segar, deadlines and commitments, what to leave in and what to leave out. I finished the extra material for *Darkness on the Edge of Town* tonight. It’s a little after 3am and I’m sitting here wondering how “Bounce, Rock, Skat Roll” by Vaughan Mason & Crew ended up in my iTunes library. I’ve got about ten-thousand songs on iTunes, the culmination of a lifelong music collection, and when I write, I put them on random shuffle. It makes for eclectic and inspiring background music. I never know what will pop up next. Jerry Reed and then Anthrax, followed by The Alan Parsons Project and then Marvin Gaye and the Public Enemy and then Johnny Cash or Guns N’ Roses or Neil Diamond or Iron Maiden or Alice in Chains or Dr. Dre. But I don’t remember ever owning this disco tune, and here it is, blasting from my computer’s speakers and subwoofer.

I don’t have a lot in life. Material wealth has not accompanied my success, and these days, I seem to have more hangers-on and acquaintances than I do real friends, but the one thing I’ve got going for me is a kick-ass collection of tunes. And an awesome fucking library. This is what I leave behind for my sons—a metric fuck-ton of books, comics and music.

Anyway, I went back through this tonight, reading what I wrote, and I noticed something. Even in this, my secret diary, I avoid mentioning the baby’s name. When he was born, Cassi and I made a decision to guard his privacy as much as possible. We’ve never posted a picture of him online. Indeed when I do talk about him in public, I refer to him as ‘Turtle,’ rather than his real name. Maybe we’re just being paranoid, but I don’t care. I’ve got enough crazies out there, and have gotten enough death threats that I’m not taking any chances. Like I said at the beginning, I genuinely half-expect to get done in by some crazed ‘fan’ one of these days. What’s to stop Nicky, the guy who said he wanted to (quote) “shoot me in the head with a crossbow because I psychically stole his story ideas” (end quote) from hopping on a Greyhound and coming to York County and tracking down my kid at school? These are the thoughts that keep a horror writer awake at night. So we guard his identity, and I did it even here, in this Word document, and I wasn’t even aware I was doing it until now.

I would do anything for my sons. I would murder others to keep them safe. My oldest son, David, is now an adult and can fend for himself. He’s as big of a genre geek as I am, and he likes telling girls who his dad is, in hopes of getting laid. And it works, too. He gets more game at sci-fi and horror conventions than Coop and I ever did back in the day. I don’t have to worry about him as much anymore. He’s a smart kid...hell, he’s not even a kid. He’s a man, now. But I still have to worry about my youngest son. The world is a scary place and he has no fear. When he attempts to climb out of his crib, he isn’t aware that he might fall. When he clambers up onto the couch and rolls around, he doesn’t realize that he could tumble off. He is not afraid of the electrical outlets or the neighbor’s dog or the swift, deep and powerful stream running through our property. He has no fear of strangers. He greets everyone he meets by waving his little hand in the air, smiling broadly until his dimples overshadow the rest of his face, and then shouting “Hi.”

Which is what he did the morning after I saw the glider moving by itself.

My mother was watching him for the day, and I had just brought him out of the house to take him over to her place. I was walking across the deck, juggling the baby and the diaper bag and a travel mug full of coffee and my car keys, when the baby suddenly whipped his head around, waved at the glider and shouted an enthusiastic greeting.

“Hi!”

Little hand waving back and forth just as fast as it could go. Big smile showing off those baby teeth

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