



OUTTAKES

OF A UFO

INVESTIGATOR

**DAVID
HALPERIN**

Chapter 8: A Land of Thick Darkness

SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 1966

1.

He sat on a low green metal stool, in the sunlit living room of the house where he'd grown up, and read to himself from the Book of Job.

*"Are not my days few? cease then,
And let me alone, that I may take comfort a little,
Before I go whence I shall not return,
Even to the land of darkness and of the shadow of death;
A land of thick darkness, as darkness itself;
A land of the shadow of death, without any order,
And where the light is as darkness."*

"Danny," said Laurie.

He looked up into her broad brown face. "Uh-huh?" he said.

"Would you like me to sit and read the Bible with you?"

He smiled and shook his head no. He didn't say, *I'll be all right*; he meant his smile to convey that. She went back to her vacuuming.

*"Is it good unto Thee that Thou shouldest oppress,
That Thou shouldest despise the work of Thy hands,
And shine upon the counsel of the wicked?
Hast Thou eyes of flesh,
Or seest Thou as man seeth?"*

He wanted to shriek these words aloud, his face turned toward heaven, his voice quivering, his hands shaking. He didn't dare. Laurie would hear him, even over the roar of the vacuum cleaner – she was now cleaning in what had once been his mother's room – and come running in. She would think he'd gone insane.

He observed his own rites of mourning because he didn't know what other rites to observe. For the first week after the burial you were supposed to "sit *shiva*" for the dead person, which meant that for seven days you sat on low stools with all the mirrors in your house covered, and you ate the bread of mourners and

you did not leave the house, and you immersed yourself in grief for the person you'd lost, now gone from you forever. But that was all past. They'd buried his mother more than two weeks ago, while he was zooming around Israel writing aerograms about how he hoped she'd be feeling better soon. *Shiva*, if it had ever been sat for her, had been sat without him.

The weather seemed wrong for *shiva*. A bright, warm, sunny morning, humid and hazy, the way you expected a Pennsylvania summer morning to be. Yet not quite summer either. There was a touch of coolness, for all the humidity, that told you summer was nearly over, autumn on its way.

Danny recognized that feel. He'd felt it in the air each of eleven seasons before, since they'd moved to Kellerfield: each time in September, before school started with him entering a new and higher grade. Now was his twelfth, his last and strangest time.

2.

Danny's father had come to Kennedy Airport last night to meet El Al flight 691 from Israel. Danny first caught sight of him through the plate glass windows that were about halfway up one wall of the large, bleak, high-ceilinged room with the maze of long tables, where you had to bring your luggage through customs.

Danny had no trouble with that. He had nothing to declare except the books he'd bought in Israel, and nobody cared about a bunch of books. He did have a lot of pottery fragments, tucked into the spaces in his suitcase where nothing else would fit. The customs officer noticed them. "Were you on a dig over there?" he asked.

"Not really," said Danny. "I visited a lot of archaeological sites, though."

The officer grunted, looking vaguely impressed. That was when Danny had looked up and seen his father standing some thirty feet away, on the other side of the plate glass window, waving to him.

"*Me bai-i-i*," Leon said, as he met Danny at the top of the escalator. "You've gotten so *tan, me bai-i-i*."

Danny didn't remember, afterward, precisely how he'd responded to this remark. He did remember saying to his father, "You know, I did manage to pick up a bit of Hebrew over there" – which his father smiled away amiably, as if it were baby's prattling to be humored, and said that maybe the suitcase *and* the typewriter together might be a little bit too much for Danny to carry, and maybe he ought to let his old Daddy-O help out a little bit. So Leon carried the typewriter, Danny the suitcase, and they walked down the airport corridor together.

Later, in the car, when they were out of the airport and on the four-lane highway, Leon said, "Bet they don't have roads like these in Israel, do they now?" Danny agreed, smiling, that they didn't.

He said: "How's Mom?"

Leon said: "Well, I'm afraid I've got bad news for you."

Danny said: "Very bad?"

– His nightmare had come real: she was rolling back and forth in her bed, her legs thick as cardboard tubing, suffocating in her blankets, gasping for air –

Leon said: "Mom is dead."

3.

"How's it feel, *me bai-i-i?*" Leon said as he switched on the lights in the house. "Being back in the old homestead."

Danny wasn't sure how it felt. What struck him was how it smelled. You never notice the smell of your own house while you're living there, and then you go away for a while and come back, and it hits you like a slap.

Her rocker, brilliant orange as ever, was still by the kitchen window. Her little table, with its pile of New York *Timeses* for her to read and cut clippings from, was still in front of the rocker. He was relieved and reassured to see, when he walked into his bedroom, that his old heavy, solid typewriter was still there, on the metal typing table next to the torchier. The greasy, dark green typewriter

cover that said ROYAL had gathered dust, as though it hadn't been removed all summer. That, too, heartened him.

Maybe that was why he couldn't do any work on his book all summer. He just didn't have the right typewriter.

He showered, sweaty from his long trip, and went to bed. Tired as he was, he didn't get to sleep right away. His mind kept flooding with images of his mother. Anna sitting on her rocker, by the kitchen window. Anna smiling, Anna laughing. Anna waving goodbye, as the car pulled away and the house receded in the distance.

He slept. He awoke in the middle of the night with an intense, disquieting sensation that he was very small, and on a swing somewhere in a playground. He was swinging very high and fast – higher and faster than he wanted to go.

He was very small. Everybody around him, as he swung, was so big they seemed like giants.

4.

"Did you expect this was going to happen?" Rabbi Silverman asked.

Danny pressed the telephone receiver against his sweating ear and wished he could just hang up. How could he answer? If he said yes, he'd sound like a brazen-hearted monster, trotting off to Israel for a summer vacation knowing full well his mother was going to die. If he said no, he'd sound like a perfect fool, blind to what everyone else had been able to see.

"Well, I knew she'd been having problems. I knew she hadn't been feeling too well. But I really wouldn't have thought – I mean, I really didn't expect –"

Danny's throat tightened. He couldn't finish the sentence.

The rabbi didn't press him. Nor did he ask, as Danny was afraid he might, why the family hadn't phoned him to come back home as soon as they realized Anna was going to die. Instead he said: "Do you know what you have to do? As a mourner?"

So that was it. Why the rabbi had told Leon, who'd relayed the message, that it might be nice if Danny were to give him a call. "I think so," Danny said.

"You know the first seven days are called *shiva*, right? You *sit shiva*, for the deceased person."

"Uh-huh," said Danny. He wanted to say, *But those seven days are already past. I wasn't here.* But he was afraid the rabbi would tell him that you can't skip the days of *shiva*, you have to make them up if you miss them. Then he'd still be sitting *shiva* next Tuesday, the day after Labor Day, and he wouldn't be able to go back to school.

"For the year," said the rabbi, "you say *kaddish* for your mother. Every time you're in *shul*. Till the first anniversary of the death. You understand?"

"Uh-huh."

"For the year, you're not allowed to listen to music. Or go to any entertainments. Movies, plays, anything like that."

"I thought that was just for the first month."

"For other close relatives, it's just the first month. For a parent, it's the whole year."

"Oh," said Danny. He wanted to cry, like he was being gypped. This was something he hadn't expected.

"People are a little bit different, in what they allow themselves," said the rabbi. "Some people allow themselves serious entertainments, after the first month. Like, serious plays. Not comedies. Serious drama."

"Or serious movies," said Danny.

"But certainly no music."

When their talk was finished Danny wandered into his father's den and lay down on the bed. It was neatly made and looked as if it hadn't been slept in for weeks. Leon had moved back into the bedroom that once had been Anna's.

He felt very tired. He tried to doze.

He opened his eyes, and for a fraction of a second he saw her. Coming out of her bedroom, as she'd always done. She was going to the kitchen, to her rocker, where she would sit and read the *New York Times*. He heard the rustling of her skirt as she came out the bedroom door. He felt the slight movement in the air as she went by.

No.

It couldn't be her.

It never would be her again.

5.

He started school. Then came Rosh Hashanah, and Danny went to synagogue both mornings of the festival, staying for the entire service, chanting the prayers and the responses although there wasn't any God to hear them. Then, the new Jewish year having begun – it felt exactly like the old one – he went back to school.

He sat at his desk in his bedroom, in a fog of boredom and exhaustion, trying to hack his way through half a week's accumulation of calculus homework. He'd only missed two days of school, yet already the classes were starting to seem disconnected, only partly intelligible. He knew that he ought to be working on his book for Basil. But the manuscript lay in the top drawer of his dresser, where he'd put it the night he got home. He could hardly bring himself even to open the drawer.

Dear Basil. I imagine you're wondering by now whether I'm dead or alive ...

But he didn't write those words, or any others, to Basil or to any of his UFO friends; and then it was Yom Kippur. He and his father fasted, and spent most of the day in synagogue, and although he didn't really believe in God he tried to get into the full feeling of Yom Kippur: the burden of sinning that lay upon him, which would be lifted when the fast ended at nightfall. He stood and beat his chest, hard, as he recited his sins.

We have sinned.

We have been guilty.

We have betrayed.

They blew the ram's horn finally, when it was dark outside, to say *it's all over, you can go eat now*. Danny had hoped to hear, as the hymns had led him to expect he might, the divine word *Forgiven!* He didn't hear this or any other word. All he heard was a horn, feebly blown.

6.

He often thought of those few things he'd learned since he'd gotten back, about his mother's final weeks. Leon had told him that at first she'd been home, in the days after he left for Israel. But when it became clear she was getting sicker by the day, they took her into the hospital in Philadelphia. She stayed a little over three weeks. Then she died.

"I think she knew, even before you left, that she wasn't going to make it," Leon said, in that sad, resonant voice of his.

Danny said nothing, but only nodded. He must have looked scared. He felt scared whenever anybody started to talk about his mother and how she'd died.

"She was *so* eager to see you go off to Israel," Leon continued, and shook his head.

Danny nodded again. In his mind, he completed Leon's sentence. *So I wouldn't have to be there at her end.*

On the dresser in what had once been her bedroom, he had noticed a half-dozen or so long, narrow strips of coarse white paper, with lists of foods mimeographed on them. He'd looked closely at them one day, while Leon was at work and school hadn't yet started.

There were some that were labeled BREAKFAST MENU, and some LUNCH MENU and some DINNER MENU. There were two blank spaces printed at the top of each one, where somebody had written in the name *Anna Shapiro* and then a date. Somebody else, presumably Anna herself, had circled the names of

different foods in pencil. From the lunch menu for her first day in the hospital, she'd circled *Hamburger* and *Fruit cocktail*.

So his mother had wanted a hamburger for lunch, three weeks before she died.

Had she enjoyed that hamburger?

Had she known she was going to die?

The menus stayed out on the dresser for two or three weeks. Then suddenly they weren't there. Leon had perhaps filed them. Or maybe he'd decided to throw them away.

Laurie had told him, that first sunny warm morning, that somebody had at the very end stolen his mother's diamond engagement ring.

"We was all in the hospital room," Laurie said. "That Monday morning. After she passed. And I looked at her lying there, and I said, *Where's her ring?* I said, *Where's her wedding ring, that she always used to wear?* And the nurses made out like they didn't know what I was talking about. And everybody looked at me, like to say, *Shut up, you!* And they all say, *You sure she was wearing it beforehand? You sure? You sure?*"

Ida and Sophie had visited Danny's mother the night before she died, and they hesitantly volunteered that they were pretty sure she'd been wearing the ring.

"Then this big fat nurse, she say, *Well, look at her fingers. You see how skinny they gotten? Maybe the ring roll off her finger by itself, roll onto the floor. And I say, So where is it now, if it roll onto the floor? Somebody just sweep it up, huh? Throw it into the trash?*"

That was as far as Laurie had managed to get in her discussion with the hospital staff. She shuddered with disgust as she thought back on it. Danny was disgusted too, and this feeling grew inside him as the weeks passed.

That's the way people are. That's what you can expect from them. When you're dying and helpless, they'll steal your wedding ring off your finger.

7.

Some time in October, a blue aerogram arrived from Israel. From Shoshana Vered.

She'd written in Hebrew. At first this seemed odd. When Danny was in Israel the two of them always spoke English. But she'd been ashamed of her written English, and maybe she supposed he'd learned enough Hebrew to understand her.

He sat at the desk in his bedroom, with the paperback dictionary he'd brought back with him, and began to read.

Shalom Danny. Mamash hizdazanu lishmoa ...

We were really shocked to hear ...

He closed the dictionary. His eyes were heavy with exhaustion. He had no stomach for hacking through this letter, word after word, no doubt having to hunt in the dictionary for every single one. It had taken him nearly a half hour just to find *mamash hizdazanu lishmoa*.

So much for all the Hebrew he was supposed to have learned this summer.

He laid Shoshana's letter on top of the swelling stack of UFO sighting reports that had been coming in from Murray Whitaker all summer, and now all fall. There it would gather dust.

It was past eleven by the kitchen clock. His father had taken to going out in the evenings, and tonight he still wasn't back from wherever he'd gone. He sat in his mother's rocker and leafed through her old New York *Timeses*.

8.

The long-awaited letter from Basil arrived at the beginning of November.

Dear Danny. Long time no hear from, friend!

He stood outside the front door, shivering in the damp wind, as he ripped the letter open. The ground where he'd laid his schoolbooks was soaked from this morning's rain. There'd be more rain tonight, possibly mixed with sleet.

It wasn't a bad letter, he thought with relief, scanning the two pages Basil had written. He didn't sound angry at Danny's long silence. A bit nervous perhaps, especially toward the end, where he remarked that *the natives* – referring to Max Levinthal – *are getting restless, as they say in the Grade B movies*. But not angry.

The front windows reflected the ragged gray skies. Behind them, behind the reflection, Danny could see the empty orange rocker where his mother once had sat. He went inside, took off his wet coat, and sat in the rocker. Again he read the letter.

Basil was calm, not mad, not worried. He knew by this time how Danny worked. You'd go for months, not hearing a blessed word. Then all of a sudden – *bam!* you'd go to your mailbox, and there'd be some splendid manuscript fresh off Danny's typewriter. Of course Basil had no inkling that the splendid manuscript had lain untouched all these months in Danny's drawer.

By the way, he wrote between parentheses, I take it that you did get my letter of July 10, didn't you? The one that I sent to the Talor Hotel, or the Squalor Hotel, or whatever its blessed name was, in Tel Aviv? I mean, if somehow they didn't give it to you, you won't have the faintest blessed idea what I mean about the revisions to the book. So do be sure to write and let me know as soon as you can, if that's what happened.

Yes, Basil. That's what happened.

I never got your letter. Maybe it was lost in the mail. Or maybe it reached the Tal-Or Hotel after I moved out, and they didn't have my address in Herzliya and I never came back to the hotel. So I don't know what revisions you're talking about. That's why I haven't even started working on the revisions, you see. So please send them to me as soon as possible, so I get to work right away.

But that would be a lie. And Danny was not a liar.

9.

*71 Sandy Creek Drive
Kellerfield, Pennsylvania
November 3, 1966*

Dear Mr. Crenshaw—

Danny stared at the sheet of paper that sat, nearly empty and blindingly white, in his typewriter. He didn't know how to go on. Every sentence that came into his mind felt wrong. His calculus homework, his physics—even his English assignment, which he normally enjoyed reading—lay untended on his desk.

Dear Mr. Crenshaw, It's been a long time since I've been out to Scofield—

A year and a half ago, a fifteen-year-old boy in a tan raincoat had marched into the Scofield police station with fake radio credentials, demanding their help with his investigation. They'd believed him, treated him with respect. He remembered this the way a feeble old man recalls his athletic youth. He could no more do such a thing nowadays than he could fly to the moon.

Leon wasn't home. He'd told Danny there was somewhere he needed to go directly from work, and he might not be back until late. He'd prepared brisket and boiled potatoes and left them for Danny in the refrigerator in a Pyrex dish, with written instructions on how long to heat them in the oven. At what temperature.

Danny sat on the edge of the bed where his mother had once slept, and, trembling, dialed the phone number.

"Could I speak with Mr. Crenshaw, please?" he said in his deepest, most adult-sounding voice.

It was Crenshaw's wife who'd answered. In the background, Danny heard a TV played very loud. A young boy was yelling something over the TV noise which sounded to Danny like, "Dad! Dad!" He was to ponder that for many days to come.

"Who's calling, please?"

"This is Dan Shapiro." He added, perhaps unwisely: "I'm phoning long distance."

"Dan Shapiro?"

"From Kellerfield, Pennsylvania." He sweated, and his heart had begun to pound. He knew this was going to turn out badly; he didn't know exactly how.

"Kellerfield –?"

"Mr. Crenshaw knows me," said Danny. "I was in Scofield last year investigating the UFO landing, and we talked –"

Mrs. Crenshaw said in a voice of ice: "Mr. Crenshaw isn't interested in that – *business* any more."

"I can understand that. But I wonder if I could talk to him, because – I would like to talk to him, if I could, please –"

"Mr. Crenshaw isn't home at present."

But I heard his son calling him! At least, I heard what I think was his son –

"But –" Danny began.

"I'll tell him you called," she said, and hung up the phone.

He sat on the edge of his mother's bed, he didn't know for how long. *What am I going to write to Basil?* he thought over and over. Many other things, too; but afterwards he couldn't remember what they were.

As he stood up to go, his eyes fell upon a shelf in the open closet. There was a small brown leather case, which he knew his mother always used for the letters she wrote to her college friends. The case was propped up against a shoebox, on the end of which his mother had once lettered in felt pen, MOM'S SNEAKS.

His mother's sneakers.

She'd always worn tennis shoes around the house. They were the most comfortable, she said, for her to wear. *They're still there*, he thought, and his heart eased. *Dad didn't throw them away.*

10.

Thanksgiving came and went. The weather, which had been cold for most of November, turned unseasonably mild. Heavy warmish fogs lay over Kellerfield, even in mid-afternoon. The school bus drove slowly, headlights burning. Danny sat in his mother's rocking chair by the kitchen window, and gazed out into the mist.

Sometimes there was mail.

Kristin wrote from Holland. She told him about her studies at the Technical University at Eindhoven, where she was a third-year student in organic chemistry. She asked if his book on UFOs had come out yet. If it hadn't, she hoped it would be out soon because she would like to read it.

She said that she had her doubts, now that she thought back upon the evening they'd spent together on the grass at Karei Deshe, about the nature of the UFO evidence, at least as she remembered it from what he'd said. Mostly it was anecdotal. Sometimes consisting of lost memories, recovered under hypnosis, hadn't he said?

Or had she read that somewhere?

Supplemented, to be sure, with a few photographs and sometimes markings left on the ground, like holes from which soil samples had supposedly been taken. Yet science has no choice but to proceed on the basis of that which is present and testable, not that which is in the past and now only remembered –

Perhaps once seen and experienced, but present now only in memory –

She went on for two more pages. Danny, weary of this and having no idea how to reply, stopped reading. He set the letter aside.

Basil wrote once more. The first thing Danny saw when he opened the envelope was that Basil had printed at the top of the letter, in large block capitals: FOR

CHRIST'S SAKE, FRIEND, WILL YOU PLEASE ANSWER YOUR
CORRESPONDENCE?!!!

He didn't read the letter. He left it on his desk, along with Kristin's letter and Shoshana's, in the great blurry pile of UFO reports from Murray Whitaker, which had continued to accumulate all autumn long, like the large wet snowflakes of an endless blizzard.

11.

One evening, when his father was out and wouldn't be back till late, Danny went into his mother's bedroom. There, on the closet shelf, was the MOM'S SNEAKS shoebox. Next to it sat the brown leather case.

Several times in the past weeks Danny had gone into the bedroom. He'd looked at the shoebox and the case for a minute or two, and gone out again. He hadn't touched either one. Now he took the case down from the shelf. Trembling, his heart beating a little faster than usual, he sat down on the edge of his mother's bed and opened it.

He didn't know what he expected to find. Not a letter to him from his mother. He knew she hadn't written to him. If she had, his father would have known about it and would certainly have mentioned it.

He never came right out and asked, *Did she leave something for me before she died?* It wasn't a question you asked a man with whom you were now alone, whom you'd have to learn to live with whether you liked it or not. Who, moreover, had never liked you all that much to begin with.

He opened her brown leather case and, sitting on the edge of her bed, leafed through it.

There were clippings from the *New York Times*, some of them dating back years, about the latest advances in heart surgery. There was sheet after sheet of unused stationery, and envelopes and stamps and her little black address book, tucked into neat pockets inside the case. There was a decorative bookmark, with flowers and birds and *the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.*

He remembered her neatness, her smiling cheerfulness, her trust that somebody would be there to take care of her and of him too ... He should stop here and put the case away, before he found something that hurt even more than these memories did.

He kept on.

There were letters in the case, written on the same stationery. She'd written them in the hospital – so he gathered from the dates – but must have been too sick to mail them. Of course there was none for him; he'd known that from the start. They were addressed to women with names like Rosie and Sylvia, who he imagined were her college friends.

1966 has been a red-letter year for Danny. He came in first in the National Bible Contest, and now is off to Israel to enjoy his prize. He's already become quite the traveler ...

Danny smiled. It was like when he was little, and he'd hear her sitting up in bed talking on her phone. About him, to some friend or relative or other: what he was doing, and how big he was getting, and what stories he was writing, and maybe what costume he was going to wear this year for Hallowe'en –

With such pride in him.

He'd lost all that this summer: while he was off enjoying his prize, being quite the traveler, riding his buses hither and yon. And the really stupid thing was this: he hadn't even known he was losing it, until he came back and found it gone.

His picture.

She had it with her in the hospital. There it was in her case, amid the letters to Rosie and Sylvia, and the sheets of stationery on which she'd no doubt planned to write to more Rosies and Sylvias. His eleventh-grade school photo, taken last January, about a million years ago.

With his mind's eye he saw her in her hospital bed, holding that same photo in her enfeebled hand. Always such an optimist – she thought at the beginning she was going to make it. By the time she realized she was going to die, she was already too sick to write. He felt the pain inside him melting into a sweet

remembrance, and understood what it mean, to be “moved to tears,” even though he didn’t actually cry.

A strange thought occurred to him. She’d died in the night; they had told him that. In her sleep, then? In the middle of a dream, maybe?

Dreaming, perhaps, about him?

He held the photograph before his eyes, as *she* might have held it before hers as she drifted into the sleep from which she never awoke. He saw then that there was writing on the back:

The kid really CAN smile. But NEVER for the camera!

What?

She’d written his name. The date of the photo. That cheerful little note of embarrassed explanation of her son’s unsmiling countenance, for Rosie or Sylvia or whoever she’d planned to send the stupid picture to, before she’d gotten too sick and forgot all about it, and left it in her stupid case with her stupid stamps and stupid envelopes —

The kid really CAN smile —

— as if I *really* had anything so goddamn much to smile about —

But NEVER for the camera! —

— so she can’t show me off anymore, like I’m some broken statue or scuffed furniture or tarnished silver —

His legs were hollow, puffed out, immobile. He felt his belly swell with grief and rage.

12.

He was in his bedroom studying when he heard the telephone ring. He paid no attention. Leon was home; he would answer. It would certainly be for Leon anyway. Who ever phoned for Danny?

A moment later he saw Leon in his doorway. "It's your friend Basil," his father said softly.

Danny looked at him. He didn't answer. For a moment he couldn't remember ever having had a friend named Basil.

"He's calling long distance."

The words *long distance* had a strange effect. Danny thought of what it might mean to be called from a long, long distance. He saw, very vividly, his mother lying sick in the room next door to his, while he sat hunched over his typewriter pounding away on his UFO book, making the unending typewriter noises that comforted her ailing heart. The noises had stopped, just for a few weeks, and her heart had stopped too. The magic vehicle that should have carried her to safety had gone down, crashed. The blame and punishment would be his, for ever and ever.

"You all right?"

"Uh-huh," he said, nodding, swallowing.

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Shall I tell Basil you're not at home?"

13.

She came to him in his dream that night.

He was in bed, sick perhaps; and she came dressed in black and sat down beside the bed. She smiled her usual gracious smile. She spoke to him: one word, over and over, which at first he couldn't hear because of the great sheet of glass between them.

Then he heard the word, or felt it: like a bullet, fired repeatedly into his brain.

FOOL.

FOOL. FOOL. FOOL.

He twisted on his bed, in rage and bafflement. *What do you mean, I'm a fool?* And she laughed, and smiled and nodded, as though soothing a child who's not only sick but also very cranky.

FOOL. FOOL. FOOL.

How've I been a fool? What have I done that was so foolish?

She laughed, showing all her teeth.

TELL ME! he sobbed – so loud that he thought, after he awoke a moment later, that he must have cried aloud in his sleep, his father might have heard.

He saw only the blackness of her back as she moved off into the darkness.