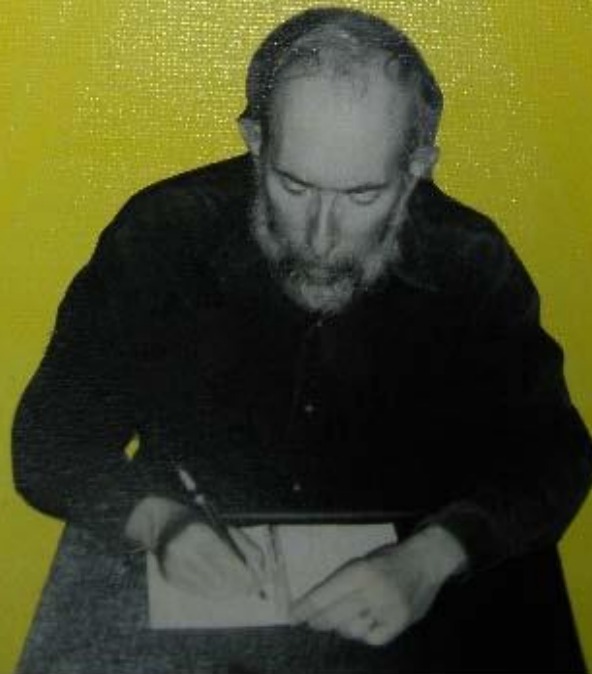


# **OUTTAKES**

**OF A UFO**

# **INVESTIGATOR**

**DAVID HALPERIN**



## Chapter 4: Mystery Within an Enigma

FEBRUARY - MAY 1966

### 1.

Basil Richard's letter arrived in February – a long-awaited crack in the endless clouds of that dreary season.

Danny had dragged himself home from the school bus stop and through the door, when Anna presented him with the letter with the New York City return address. He ripped it open, his heart pounding.

"Mom!" he cried. "They want me to write them a book!"

Cloverleaf Press wanted it very much, it seemed. So badly did they want it, according to Basil, that it had been with the greatest difficulty he'd persuaded his editor to give Danny until July to send a draft of *Mystery Within an Enigma*, which was what he'd suggested they call Danny's book. "What the hell does he need five months for?" Max Levinthal had demanded of Basil. Danny had already gathered his facts; he knew exactly what he wanted to say. Why not just sit down and write it?

Basil had managed to assuage the lion's wrath while avoiding all mention of the real reason Danny needed five months to write the book – namely, that he was in the eleventh grade and couldn't stop going to school without running afoul of Pennsylvania state law. It couldn't be concealed forever, of course. Sooner or later Max Levinthal would have to be told that Cloverleaf's latest author was a sixteen-year-old prodigy. But that was best done when Levinthal had the manuscript in hand, and could see for himself what the prodigy was capable of.

Danny blurted out the marvelous news to his mother in a great jumble of excitement. Anna listened with a serene, patient smile, which would have communicated to anyone who knew her well – a category which ought to have included Danny but didn't – that she didn't believe any of this was going to happen. This Basil Richard had struck her from the word go as a *luftmensch*, his head filled with crazy ideas. Danny kept saying he was a famous author, but if he was so famous it was funny she'd never heard of him except from Danny.

The New York *Times*, as far as she could remember, had never reviewed any of his books. And now this Max Levinthal sounded just as crazy.

Still, she wouldn't have cheated Danny of the excitement and anticipation. In her own experience, anticipation was by far the greater part of any joy. When what you were so eagerly looking forward to actually happened, it was normally a letdown. If for some reason it didn't happen, at least you had had the fun of looking forward to it.

Besides, she never saw Danny so happy as when he was at his typewriter, surrounded by books and papers, working away on one of his projects, UFOs or whatever else.

## 2.

Monday afternoon in art class, Danny announced his news. It wasn't a very big class. There were only about a dozen kids plus Mr. Herrero, the art teacher. They worked at their art projects at long tables, or at easels, while they gossiped and joked with each other or with Mr. Herrero.

"My, my," said Mr. Herrero. "Danny's headed for fame and fortune. Soon he'll be on the best-seller list. Sandra, you can go out with Danny then, when he's a best-selling author. He'll have money then. Him and Phil Carlisle."

"I wouldn't go out with Phil Carlisle," said Sandra Gilbert. She was a tall, striking redhead who'd made sure from the first day of classes that everyone in school, students and teachers alike, knew her name wasn't Sandy but *Sandra*. "I'd go out with Dan, though," she said. "Dan has personality."

"It's too bad Danny didn't tell us about this last week," Mr. Herrero said to her. "You could have gone to the Valentine's dance with him."

"I've never known what's so special about Valentine's Day, anyway," said Sandra Gilbert.

She stepped back from her easel and contemplated the painting she was working on. It showed a young girl sitting tensely on a stone wall, rigidly holding a red umbrella over her head. Beyond the wall was a beach; beyond the beach, a dark,

threatening sea. The girl's eyes were wide and staring, as though in terror. But her face seemed otherwise calm and composed. Her dress was red, like her umbrella.

"I'm not so sure it's going to be a best-seller," said Danny. "Basil keeps saying there's a great market for UFO books nowadays, but I've never heard of anybody who got rich from writing one."

Nobody replied to this. Sandra kept examining her painting, and Danny looked at it too. Was the girl's hair in the painting supposed to be red? He couldn't tell. It was in shadow.

"Do you like it, Dan?" said Sandra.

Danny nodded enthusiastically, if a bit jealously. Her painting, he had to admit, was much better than his own. He was trying to paint one of the scenes of idolatry described in the Book of Ezekiel, the one where the prophet crawls into a small chamber in the Temple and sees people worshipping "every detestable form of creeping things and beasts." He wanted the monsters to look terrifying, but the effect so far was more cartoonish than scary. There was more menace in one line of Sandra's painting than in all his "creeping things and beasts" put together.

### 3.

The first of the packets from Murray Whitaker arrived a week or so after Basil's letter. Anna handed Danny the envelope when he came home from school, asking for his mail.

It was postmarked Minneapolis, and was relatively slender. It consisted of four sheets of onion-skin paper covered with faint blue typescript, obviously made by one of a long series of carbon paper sheets. Nine newspaper stories from different parts of the country, reporting UFO sightings from the first two weeks of February, were quoted in their entirety. A note was attached, written on a piece of stationery with the letterhead of a Minneapolis ball bearing manufacturing firm, its address different from the return address on the envelope. *Basil wrote me to send these to you. Very truly yours, Murray Whitaker.*

There was no explanation of who Murray Whitaker might happen to be, or how he'd gotten hold of the newspaper stories he'd copied.

Danny excused himself and went to his room. He pulled out a large map of the United States and plotted the sightings – there were eleven – to see if any patterns might emerge. None did. He set the map aside and went to his typewriter.

#### 4.

*Do drop Murray a note, Basil wrote around the middle of March, just to let him know you've been getting his stuff.* For some reason Danny couldn't imagine, Basil was using a green typewriter ribbon; the result was the oddest-looking letter Danny'd ever seen. *I gather it's been coming in thick?*

Well, yes, it had. Danny, sweating in the heat of his desk lamp and the torchier that stood beside his typewriter, felt a pang of guilt that he hadn't had time to write Murray Whitaker, whoever he was, and thank him for it. He hadn't even had time to digest it all. Every week the mailman brought Danny two and sometimes three envelopes from Minneapolis, each thicker than the last, each filled with nearly unreadable carbon copies of sighting reports culled from newspapers all over the country.

Danny should have begun at once to write to Whitaker and to Basil himself, whose letters he hadn't yet found time to answer. Instead he pulled a large manila envelope out of the file folder he'd labeled SCOFIELD LANDING, and took the photographs out of the envelope.

They were a half-dozen large glossies. Bob Jameson had taken them, the afternoon he and his family had met Danny in that rain-drenched clearing, and a few weeks afterward he'd mailed them to Danny as a gift. The two Jameson girls squatted, in one of the photos, to measure the crater the UFO had left behind.

Danny stared at the photo. An immense, overpowering longing paralyzed him. What a pretty girl Christie Jameson was. What very pretty legs she had, and what very short shorts she'd been wearing that day. Her squatting position had pulled up those short shorts to reveal even more of her attractive legs than they

did when she was standing. What a pity it was he'd never seen her again, that the Jamesons' idea of having him back for dinner hadn't worked out.

Not that it mattered. Christie had a boyfriend. And even if she didn't—how could he imagine a girl that good-looking would ever be interested in him?

There was a knock at the door. He shoved the photograph under a pile of typescript on his desk. "Come in!" he called out.

Leon came in.

"Danny, you know what time it is?"

Obviously Danny knew what time it was. The clock on his desk was in plain view of them both. It ticked so loudly you couldn't hear yourself think. "It's eleven-oh-eight," he said.

"I *know* it's eleven-oh-eight," his father said angrily. "What I mean is, it's *late*. How much longer you think you're going to be up working?"

"About another half-hour," Danny said. He'd actually planned to be up another hour at the least, but now seemed a good time for a tactical concession.

"Another half-hour," said Leon, shaking his head. "And you'll be up for school at six-thirty. Tell me, Danny. How do you get by without sleep?"

He didn't sound angry now. He sounded curious, as if he genuinely wanted to know.

Danny looked over the wilderness of typewritten pages on his desk. He wanted to say, *This is my path. This is my destiny. Solving the UFO mystery is what I was put on earth to do.* A great wave of exhaustion came over him with this thought. He said to Leon, "I don't know. I just don't need much sleep, I guess."

Leon looked, as Danny had, at the papers that covered the desk. He picked up one sheet. "One hundred sixty-eight," he read from the upper right corner. "You've written *one hundred and sixty-eight* pages of this thing?"

"One hundred and seventy-four," said Danny. He couldn't keep the pride entirely out of his voice.

“How many more you got to go, you think?”

Danny did a rapid calculation in his mind. The results were not very comforting. “I’m not sure.”

“Well,” said Leon. He thought for a moment. “Well, worst comes to worst, you can always use it for a paperweight.”

A joke? But Leon didn’t seem to be in a jocular mood. “Your *mother* needs sleep,” he snarled. “Even if you don’t. Think she likes listening to that endless goddamn racket from your typewriter? She’s up half the night listening to it. Haven’t you noticed it keeps her up?”

Danny knew that wasn’t true. Once, two or three years ago, when he was sitting with his mother and they were talking about his UFO friends and the long letters he wrote them, she’d said, *Don’t worry about keeping me up if you have to work late. The sound of your typing doesn’t disturb me. It actually comforts me* – she’d said, smiling – *to know you’re there.*

Leon didn’t smile. He hardly ever smiled these days, at least not at Danny or his mother. For other people, outside the family, Leon had plentiful smiles. Danny had noticed this, and it grieved him.

“I want you to go to bed,” Leon said. “Right now.”

## 5.

“The *Times* ran an editorial on UFOs today,” Leon said to Danny one evening the next week. “Would you like me to read it to you?”

It was six-thirty, and the Shapiro family was finishing dinner. More accurately, Leon and Danny were finishing dinner. Anna had stopped eating a while ago – she hadn’t had much appetite lately – and had moved from the table to her rocking chair. She found it difficult to sit at the table for any length of time.

Spring, in theory, had begun a few days earlier. Amazingly, it actually felt a little like spring. The day had been warm and delightful. They had begun their meal, in fact, by leaving the doors open so they could get a bit of fresh air; till Anna

had complained of feeling a chill, and then they closed up again. The sun had set in splendor as they were starting to eat. They could see a little bit of the sunset through the wide dining room window.

The meal had been unpleasant. Most meals in the Shapiro household were, nowadays. Leon sat in long brooding silences, punctuated by jumping up nervously and rushing to the back door to make sure the neighbors' dog wasn't invading their back yard. Sometimes it was, sometimes it wasn't. He'd had several long telephone conversations with the neighbors, an Italian family named Vincenzo, which always ended with their promising to keep the dog leashed. But they didn't. Or they did only sometimes.

As soon as he'd swallowed the last of his food, Danny asked to be excused to his room.

"You going to do homework?" Leon asked. "Or work on — that thing of yours?"

"That thing" was Leon's standard designation for Danny's book. The first few times he used it, Danny had reminded him that the book's title was *Mystery Within an Enigma* and not "that thing." By now he'd grown used to the gibe, tired of protesting. "I thought I'd like to do some writing this evening," he said softly.

That was when Leon asked him if he wanted to hear what today's New York *Times* editorial had to say about UFOs.

Danny wanted to answer, *Not really*. He knew already what the editorial was going to say. The *Times* was notoriously anti-UFO, worse than any other newspaper or magazine except possibly *Time* magazine. Leon's voice, moreover, had a nasty, didactic, gonna-set-you-wise tone that convinced Danny something unpleasant was bound to follow. Still, he couldn't afford to give the appearance of shrinking from criticism.

"Sure, why not?" he said.

Leon rose from the table. He ceremoniously picked a newspaper from the pile that was on the small table in front of Anna's rocker, and folded it to the editorial page. He stood leaning back against the sink, his left foot resting on the seat of the kitchen chair on which he'd just been sitting, the newspaper laid on his left



knee. Anna smiled timidly, expectantly, like a neglected little girl who's finally getting a story read to her but isn't entirely sure she'll like it.

"*Those Flying Saucers*," Leon read aloud. He looked up and said to Danny, "That's the title of the editorial."

Yes, *I gathered*, Danny wanted to say. He nodded.

"*Men have a strange propensity*," Leon read, "*for seeing what they expect or want to see, as any magician knows. This trait, probably more than any other, accounts for 'flying saucer' episodes like the ones reported yesterday and Monday in Michigan.*"

"Is he going to give an explanation for the sightings?" Danny asked. A glowing football-shaped object had been seen near Ann Arbor and Hillsdale, Michigan, on two successive evenings. It hovered just above the ground, sometimes within a few hundred yards of the witnesses, who included twelve policemen and eighty-seven Hillsdale College coeds, plus the assistant dean of women.

"*Un' momento*," said Leon, raising his hand. "Just ho-o-old your horses. You're going to hear everything, my boy. I'm going to read it to you."

He went on reading. "*The scientific community and the armed forces, as such, have dismissed such reports with thinly disguised scorn.*" He paused slightly before the words *thinly disguised scorn*, and enunciated them with particular care. "*The astronomers say other worlds that could support beings like ourselves are so distant that travel here would border on the impossible and frequent visits would be*" – again, pause and special enunciation – "*preposterous.*"

Danny listened silently, boiling in helpless fury, as the smug, dismissive phrases rolled forth from his father's mouth. He'd heard such arguments a thousand times over. The editorial was not merely glib and pretentious, but utterly predictable. Of course the writer didn't even mention the details of the sightings, much less try to explain them. Why should he? UFO skeptics can't be bothered with details. They insist on arguing in generalities, and couldn't tell a good sighting from a poor one if their lives depended on it.

All that remained, finally, was for the writer to come up with some snide flippancy for his conclusion. Sure enough, here it was: "*The flying saucer enthusiasts demonstrate human frailties that are likely to sail on forever.*"

Leon set down the paper and looked up at Danny, as if waiting for applause.

"Well, my boy," he said. "That's what the finest newspaper in the country has to say about your UFOs."

"They're entitled to their opinion." Danny had thought of asking how a human frailty might go about sailing. But he didn't want to argue. Tonight was a night for work, not arguments.

"And you're entitled to yours? Is that right?"

"That's right."

"And your opinion is just as good as theirs? That's what you think, isn't it?"

"I've studied the evidence. They haven't."

"And just how do you know that, my boy?"

"Because they don't have one single thing to say about it!" This burst out of Danny without his quite willing it. Apparently there was going to be an argument after all. "All they do – all they do –"

"You don't have to raise your voice," said Leon. Danny saw that his mother, too, was looking at him sternly. He forced himself to speak softly.

"I'm sorry I shouted. But you read that editorial again and you'll see. They don't talk at all about what's important. I mean, the sightings. The observational data. All they do is sneer, and ridicule, and quote their dogmatic authorities, and drag in irrelevancies. Mostly ridicule. Like that passage about *scorn* – what was it? at the beginning – *the scientists scorn*, or something –"

"*The scientific community and the armed forces, as such, have dismissed such reports with thinly disguised scorn,*" Leon read.

"That's it! What they're saying is, the dogmatic scientists ridicule us, the Air Force ridicules us, so why don't *they* go ahead and ridicule us. That's some argument, isn't it? Some great wonderful argument! So that anybody who dares to disagree, anybody who dares to question, anybody who dares to think for himself –"

“Well, maybe they ridicule you because you’re pretty ridiculous!” Leon bellowed. He leaned over the table toward Danny, clutching the newspaper, nearly crumpling it with the violence of his grasp. “Has that ever occurred to you? *That you are ridiculous?*”

Anna let out something between a sigh and a wail. Danny felt the waters of bitterness rise within him, as though they might rise to his nostrils and drown him. Has that ever *not* occurred to me? he thought. I am after all one of the damned, those who are scorned and ridiculed and cast out ...

*A procession of the damned, Charles Fort had written. By the damned, I mean the excluded. We shall have a procession of the data that Science has excluded. Battalions of the accursed, captained by pallid data that I have exhumed, will march. You’ll read them – or they’ll march. Some of them livid and some of them fiery and some of them rotten ...*

The words were his aid and comfort, allies in the desperate struggle to keep from crying in front of his father. *They’ll march*, Fort had written, and the words echoed over and over inside him. *We’ll march, we’ll march, we’ll march ...*

## 6.

The sky darkened outside their dining room windows.

“ – that troop of horny college girls,” Leon declared, his voice loud with anger and contempt. He was delivering his own analysis of the Hillsdale UFO sightings, which consisted essentially of his opinion on the character of the witnesses. “Getting themselves laid, out on the campus lawn, first nice warm night in spring; needed something to tell their den mother why they were so late getting back, didn’t they? So along comes a nice football-shaped flying saucer, and –”

“*They weren’t out on the campus lawn!*” Danny cried. The girls had been inside their dormitory all during the sighting. They had watched the UFO from their windows. The assistant dean of women had sat and watched it with them. All these details were right there in Leon’s precious *New York Times*. Hadn’t he read them?

"Vass you dere, Char-lie?" Leon asked, in his comic German accent. It was one of his stock jokes, something he said when he wanted to be funny. Anna laughed happily, out of relief that Leon was starting to make jokes again. He shot her a murderous look.

"And that drunk *shvartze* up in New England? Gets home five in the morning, says, *Wa'n't mah fault, boss; ah done got kidnapped by some big ole you-eff-oh*. He's one of your *reliable witnesses*, too, isn't he?"

"Drunk *shvartze*?" This hadn't been in the New York *Times* stories, not that Danny could remember. "What are you talking about?"

"You haven't heard about him?" said Leon. "I'm amazed. I thought there wasn't one damn flying saucer story you hadn't heard."

He looked genuinely surprised, also uncomfortable, as if he expected Danny to pump him for details he didn't know. "Colored man," he said, "in New England. Pete Radford was telling me at work. He says this UFO came and picked him up while he was driving, took him aboard. A while later they let him go. Him and his wife. That's why he didn't get home till five in the morning. Of course he *doesn't* mention the sixteen bars they stopped in earlier that night. That's not really *relevant*, you know." Comic British accent, this time.

Danny didn't answer. He didn't know what to say. He supposed this Radford character had got hold of a distorted version of some contactee story and passed it on to Leon, who no doubt had managed to distort it still further. He thought of trying to explain, as he had several times in the past, that the contactees weren't reliable and objective UFOlogists didn't take them seriously. But there was something different here; it puzzled him, gave him pause. All the contactees he'd known about were white. The spacemen they met, male and female, were Nordic types with flowing blond hair. He'd never heard of a Negro contactee.

"So his wife came with him for the flying saucer ride, did she?" said Anna, trying to get her gracious smile back in place. "That's nice, isn't it? I mean, it would have been so *mean* of him not to take her along."

"Uh-huh," said Leon. He looked at Anna for a moment, hesitating. Then he said, "His wife was a *veisse*. That's what Pete told me."

Danny saw his parents smile at each other, in a manner sly and conspiratorial, yet at the same time awkward and ashamed. *A veisse*. A white woman. What in hell was going on here, between Leon and Anna? If ever there was a mystery within an enigma, and a further enigma tucked inside the mystery, this was it. This slyness, this sense of fumbling around some embarrassing and painful secret ... what did it remind him of?

Of course. Basil Richard's tone of voice, that evening in the Stuyvesant Hotel. *A salt-and-pepper couple, if you take my meaning*. And the way Glickman burst out laughing when Basil said that ... It came to him then: Betty and Barney Hill. It was their abduction by the UFO that Leon was talking about. John Fuller's article in *Look* magazine must have just come out.

Only he hadn't understood until this moment that Barney Hill was a Negro.

"That part about him being drunk," Danny said. "And that they'd stopped in sixteen bars that night. Was that what Pete Radford told you? Or did you just make that up?"

When had he spoken to his father like this? Leon stared, his eyes bulging in fury. He tried to open his mouth, then closed it.

"Just because he's a Negro," Danny said, "doesn't mean he was drunk."

"No, that's right," said Leon. The rage was still in his eyes, but his voice stayed quiet and level. His *let's-discuss-this-reasonably* voice. "Just because he's a Negro *doesn't* necessarily mean he was drunk. You're right about that."

He walked around the table to Danny, and put his hand on Danny's shoulder. Danny tried hard not to flinch.

"But let me ask you this, my son," he said, his voice rapidly rising in volume till, at the end, it was a hoarse roar. "How many *sober* people do you know who get kidnapped by flying saucers?"

7.

The rocking chair creaked. Anna leaned forward, grasped the little table in front of her with her left hand and the kitchen table with her right, and heaved herself up out of the chair. She stood unsteadily on her feet for a moment, panting from her exertion. Then she said, with her gracious smile: "I'll leave you boys to finish your conversation. I'm going to lie down and rest for a little bit."

They watched as she shuffled off, still breathing heavily.

Abruptly Leon turned and ran to the back door. It was almost totally dark. If there was anything in the yard outside, Danny couldn't see it. But Leon opened the door and bellowed "*Geddaddahere!*" in a voice so loud and intense that the neighbors surely must have heard it, even with their doors and windows closed. From the back yard, Danny heard an animal scamper away through the dry grass.

Leon shut the door and turned his gaze on Danny. Danny looked at his father's chalky face, at the eyes wild with rage, and thought, *The man is insane*. He pushed the thought away, and a moment later had forgotten he ever had it.

"They send that goddamn dog over here," said Leon, "just to shit in our yard. They've been doing that for months now. They do it one more time, you know what I'm going to do?"

"No, I don't," said Danny. He wasn't frightened; he didn't know why not.

"I'm going to get me a nice doggie bowl. And some nice doggie food. And I'm going to make a meal for Poochie. A *real* nice meal. A meal he'll remember for the rest of his short doggie life."

"You're going to poison their dog?" Danny said, not so much shocked as puzzled.

Leon pulled his head and shoulders back, raised his hand in a strange gesture. Danny couldn't read the gesture or his father's expression. Almost as if Leon was disowning, recoiling from his own intention. He was about to speak, it seemed; but Danny never knew what he was going to say. From Anna's bedroom came the noise of something falling, crashing to the floor. Then Anna's terrified cry. "*Leon!*"

They ran to the bedroom, Danny following his father. They found her lying on the floor beside the bed, in the few feet of space between the bed and a huge overstuffed chair she sometimes used as a kind of way-station between resting in bed and moving around the house, where she could sit if she needed to and gather her strength for that final push. Her eyeglasses had flown off her face; her large eyes stared blindly, focused on nothing. Her face was a twisted mask of terror. She sobbed and gibbered, over and over, "I fell, Leon! Leon, I fell!"

The yellow light of her bedside lamp surrounded her fallen body like a spotlight. In that light, her skin seemed to have turned yellow.

Leon took her gently by the shoulders and helped her up into bed. The covers were already turned down. She'd apparently been all ready to climb into bed when she somehow slipped. He began probing her, pressing and poking at different parts of her body to see where she was bruised, if anything was broken. "It hurts *here*, Leon," she wailed, pointing to her thigh. "It hurts *here*."

Danny watched from the doorway of the bedroom. He took two steps forward, with some vague idea of helping, but then stopped, paralyzed. On some impulse he looked down to the floor; her glasses, unbroken, lay a foot or so in front of him. Leon pulled up her skirt. Sure enough, there on her left thigh was a huge, ugly bruise, already turning vivid purple and yellow. He pressed it with his fingers. She moaned in pain.

"I don't think anything's broken," Leon said. "You'll be all right." He laughed then, comfortingly, and said again, "You'll be all right"; pronouncing it this time in a kind of comic tone, as if he were saying, "And a-way we go."

She laughed with him. But the tears were at the same time flowing down her withered cheeks.

"Dad," said Danny. He'd picked up the glasses; now he stepped forward and handed them to his father. Leon turned to take them, and gave Danny a look that seemed to say, *She's hanging by a thread, my boy.*

Danny looked at the hideous purple and yellow on his mother's thigh. He looked at, and perhaps for the first time actually saw, the swollen puffy legs that contrasted so dreadfully with her withered arms. He knew then that it was true,

that she was hanging by a thread. A deep grieving began, or began again, inside him.

Very gently, Leon replaced the glasses on his wife's face. He pulled the covers over her, and sat by her, stroking her, comforting her.

At no point did Anna speak to Danny, or even look at him. Even now, when she had her glasses back. He stood watching a few minutes. Then he went into his room and began typing furiously.

## 8.

He went to sleep with the image in his mind of his mother as a dying infant, bruised and frail and unable to breathe, and she was hanging by a thread and he must somehow keep that thread from snapping but he knew he couldn't. He woke, hours later, from a hideous dream in which he was running, using all his strength, trying to gain momentum so he could hurl himself through a vast, tangled spiderweb that had been spun across the inside of an arch that was the beginning of a tunnel through which he must pass. He didn't know why he must pass through it, but he must; and there was no stopping or turning back. Only, he could not get enough momentum, and the web went on endlessly, and sooner or later he had to stop and be caught in it.

The spider was there, although he couldn't see it; suspended, terrifyingly, just outside his field of vision.

## 9.

*Haven't heard from you in ages*, Basil wrote to Danny around the middle of May. Danny cringed in shame as he tore open the envelope; he'd let Basil's last two letters go unanswered. *What's happening with you? What's happening with our book?*

A whole lot had been happening. For one thing, Danny had won a national contest on the Bible, which he'd competed in almost without thinking about it, his mind caught up in the book. The first prize was a summer trip to Israel. The



money was provided for the plane ticket; he'd have to make his own arrangements once he got there. The finals of the contest – from which he'd emerged with a *First Prize Winner* certificate, his name hand-lettered in the blank – had been held in New York City on Sunday, the first of May. That day no longer seemed quite real. Months ago he'd ached to win the contest, to claim the prize. Now it felt like nothing at all.

*Dear Basil, It hurts like hell for me to say this, but I don't think I can write the book –*

There'd been dismaying news from Scofield. His grandmother had seen it in her *Trenton Times* and faithfully relayed it to his mother, who passed it on to Danny without prelude or warning. She'd then sat back in her rocker, smiling her everlasting serene smile. As though she hadn't noticed Danny looked like he'd been punched in the stomach and was about to crumple up.

*I don't think I can write the book because the Scofield landing, which was the centerpiece of the whole thing, which all my arguments depended on – it's turned out to be a hoax. Some dirty lying cheater of a chemistry student, name of Marty Fogleman, who probably cheated his way into college, too dumb to get in any other way – he dug the holes and set off gunpowder and then told Frank Crenshaw's kids he'd seen the UFO land. And then he sat there laughing. While we were investigating, studying, reasoning, doing our best to find the truth – it was all a joke to him, the damn shitfaced hyena; he just sat there and laughed –*

No. Mustn't talk this way. Mustn't lose faith.

Marty Fogleman was lying. He'd made up his confession out of whole cloth, so he could sell it for a hundred dollars to some Philadelphia newspaper. Frank Crenshaw had told Danny all about it, when Danny phoned him from a public phone the dreadful evening that followed that dreadful afternoon. The truth was that Crenshaw's sons had been approached by *two* young men, neither of whom, Crenshaw assured Danny, had looked anything at all like Marty Fogleman.

He was lying. The Scofield landing was real. Danny had shown that, in his *PURA Bulletin* article. He'd prove it again in his book.

*Dear Basil, It hurts like hell for me to say this, but I don't think I can get the manuscript to you before next fall. I don't think I told you, but I entered a Bible contest this spring and the first prize was a trip to Israel, and somehow or other – surprise, surprise! – I won the contest.*

*I really want to spend the summer in Israel, Basil. I want it more than I think I've ever wanted anything, to go to Israel and learn Hebrew from the lips of a pretty little Israeli girl. I've always wanted to learn Hebrew, because the Bible is written in it but also because it's really my own language, in a way, but I can't learn it here because all the teachers here are idiots who don't know anything and can't teach anything and all the kids are shitfaced hyenas who always laughed at me because I didn't know anything about baseball and then because I couldn't dance. And also I've always wanted a pretty little girl so I could learn from her lips, not only Hebrew but all sorts of other things. But I've never had a girl, Basil, I've never even had a date, because all the Jewish girls here are shitfaced hyenas just like the boys and I can't go out with a shiksa, you see, because my mother is dying and I don't want to make her die any quicker –*

Impossible.

He couldn't tell this to Basil. He couldn't tell it to anybody.

He stared for a moment at the blank piece of paper in his typewriter. He then began writing, fast and furious as ever, on his book.

## 10.

Outside his windows the warm spring evenings darkened softly. The sounds of children playing baseball, across the street, drifted in through the window with the occasional breeze.

Danny hardly heard them. He typed all evening, every evening, by the torchier's hot light. He typed and sweated, caught in the blazing vise between his typewriter and his chair, as the book stretched, endless, ahead of him.

*You chose this path*, he told himself. It was his incantation: against the weariness, the staggering loneliness, the unspeakable weight of the burden fastened upon him. *No complaining, now. You chose it.*

Anna was in the house with him, but he hardly spoke to her. He thought only of the book.

One afternoon, passing by the kitchen table, he found a newspaper clipping left on his place-mat. It was from the *New York Times*. Anna had seen it during her wanderings back and forth through the *Times*, and had cut it out for him.

He read it. It was a story about how some big organization in New York had given a whole bunch of research grants, five to ten thousand dollars apiece, to college professors who were doing research on one thing or another.

She'd written, at the top of the clipping: *And you work for nothing??? You FOOL you!!*

*FOOL*, in big block capitals.

She sat in her rocker, smiling her eternal smile. She watched him, and she laughed. It was only a joke, he later told himself. She doesn't really think I'm a fool.